

Distance lends Enchantment to the View: An Exploratory Reading on Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Last Friend*

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Abstract

Existentialism is a philosophical study that enquires into the problems relating to human existence and gives insights to seek one's true existence. The insatiable thirst to explore the purpose of life and the meaning of existence and to prove their worth to the world is innate in human beings. The people, who hear this clarion call, cross the borders if they fail to find their existence in their homeland. The migrants, who leave their country are going through psychological, physiological and traumatic turbulences in the course of migration and in the migrated land. The longing for one's identity, culture, traditions and homeland is very evident in them. This is beautifully portrayed in Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Last Friend*. Existential Migration is a theory that focuses on the lived experiences of migrants, the experience of foreignness, what constitutes belonging and the nature of homelessness. The idea is put forward by Greg Madison. The present study analyses migrant's sufferings and their existential conflicts in the novel *The Last Friend* within the framework of existentialism and existential migration theory.

Keywords: Existence; Existentialism; Existential migration; Home; Nostalgia; Migration.

The history of human life is the history of seeking existence even from the age of Neanderthal man. The ancestors travel from one place to another for food and shelter which are essential for their survival. The journey for existence has its roots in bygone ages that continue in different forms despite the modern world being technologically and intellectually advanced. Scientists believed that Homo sapiens migrated from their homelands to new ones in search of natural resources and gradually use the earth's re-

sources to construct semi-permanent houses. Humans shifted from nomadic lifestyle to fixed homes and these semi-permanent settlements are the buildingblocks of established communities and it causes the development of agricultural collective cultivation. The existence of human beings inseparably attached to their interactions with others and their immediate environment. Dr. Alexander Martin in his work on human existence states that "The essence of human existence is based on the understanding that we are not just a physical and psychological being but also social. In other words, our existence is defined by our interactions with others; be they significant or otherwise" (2). The journey of people to alien lands in search of material prospects as well as their existence is called migration in the modern world

Migration is a social phenomenon that exists with the sustenance of human beings on earth. People migrate to other lands for several reasons but the main reason behind changing their residence is to improve their living conditions and to find meaning of their existence. "When a person shifts his residence from one political or administrative boundary to another, it is known as "migration"" (Nirmala 3). The predicaments for existence in one's homeland urges one to leave the land and migrate to another where they expect to mark their identity and thereby existence. Migration is generally defined as a process of adapting a new environment, shifting to another geographical area, adjusting to the local cultural needs and becoming a part of the local system. The process will make a definite influence on the life of a migrant as a whole when he/she goes through it.

Modern men are so busy to chase their dreams in the materialistic world. They are ready to seek any possible way to fulfil their dreams. They ride to distant places in pursuit of pleasure, adventures, happiness and economic prosperity. Migrants encounter many obstacles on the way to reaching their so-called dreamland. They induce themselves with the thought that the new land is the key that opens the doors of eternal happiness and comfort that they long for. The expectations of the new land and the prosperous future they believed to attain soon make them blind the reality and confine themselves inside the mirage what they create. They are shot down by the arrows of harsh reality the moment they come out of the cosy and warm shell of their imaginations. The unforeseen reality that they ever dreamed plunges them into the river of existential crisis and anxiety. The dreams and aspirations that bestow wings to reach their destination become a brutal nightmare that shackles them into everlasting sorrow and depression when they face the truth. Most of the migrants are deceived by the external appearance and alluring lifestyles of other migrated people

that sow the seeds of delusion in their minds which dim-witted them to see the actuality.

Nowadays people are more obsessed with possessing worldly pleasures and extravagant lifestyles. They are preoccupied with the belief that their true existence lies in the fulfilment of their dreams. The endeavours and efforts in fulfilling their dreams become empty at the sight of reality and realise that true existence is possible only through finding the meaning and purpose of life. Existentialism is the philosophy that deals with the issues of human existence.

Existentialism is also a philosophic movement that explores questions related to the meaning, purpose and value of human existence. The Western movement flourished under the guidance of thinkers like Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Existentialists argue that the inability to find and acknowledge meaning in one's life causes anxiety which leads to an existential crisis. Existential crises are inner conflicts characterised by the impression that life lacks meaning and are usually accompanied by stress and anxiety in home land. These crises disorders one's normal functioning in daily life and subsequently lead to depression. However, existentialists believe that it is very important to choose the way to find the meaning of life and individuality wherever they are. The philosophical inquiry was later developed by many eminent writers such as Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Paul Tillich and many others. Existentialism influenced many disciplines apart from philosophy such as arts, literature and theology. Novels and dramas rooted in existential philosophy are popular in modern, post-modern and postcolonial writings. Many existential writers have explored anxiety that involves the meaning of life. Since existential aspects were the undercurrent theme of many literary works, writers found it so essential to make existentialism an independent field of study and thus emerged existential literature. The field of study encompasses various disciplines such as Atheistic existentialism, Black existentialism, Christian existentialism, Cosmism, Existential humanism, Existential nihilism, Existential migration, Feminist existentialism, Jewish existentialism, Postmodern theology and Theatre of the Absurd.

Existential migration is a recent addition to the existential literature that focuses on current understandings of migration with an underlying existential dimension. The theoretical foundation was put forward by Greg Madison, a renowned chartered psychiatrist and existential psychotherapist in 2006. The theory explores psychological, psychoanalytical and phe-

nomenological approaches to analyse the life and experiences of migrants.

Migration is either the deliberate or unwilling movement of people from one place to another for their sustenance. Problems relating to the existence, identity and survival are inherent in every migration. The transnational interventions and corporate internationalism is generating more demands and opportunities for a mobile workforce and thus encouraging unprecedented growth in the numbers of voluntary migrants. It is a well-known fact that though these cross-cultural experiences are both exciting and enriching, they are having struggles, pain and distress. "The existential dynamics of voluntary migration may unveil a more ubiquitous malaise underlying our 'post-modern' world. Or perhaps such an analysis will offer some small comment on the tensions inherent in the givens of human existence"(Madison 16).

Madison, while putting forward the theory envisaged that the difficulties that come across while living a life as a migrant in an alien land may harbour an implicit element of the struggle for home, a deeply human struggle. "Migration changes dramatically our outer reality, and imposes on us, at least temporarily, a discrepancy between inner and outer, and the task of reconciling them if we are to adapt and survive with any degree of mental health" (Weber 8). Existential migration theory mainly focuses on the feeling at home and circumstances that make people think that they are far away from home. Madison insinuates various meanings for the term home apart from its root meaning as a dwelling place such as something familiar, comfortable or hidden thoughts and feelings of the human psyche. Migrants always wish to make a new home in alien places but the social scenario and certain painful circumstances in those places restrict them to do so. Anxiety, depression and loneliness are the fundamental aspects of existentialism that sprung up when their idea of home shatters.

Madison's theory focuses on lived experiences of voluntary migrants, the reasons that provoked their initial leaving, their longings to return home and what happens them during the process. The author emphasizes the idea of 'not being at home' or 'uncanny' to explore the existential sufferings of migrants. The term 'uncanny' denotes the psychological experiences of something as not simple but creepy in a familiar way. Ernest Jenstch set out the concept in his work *On the Psychology of Uncanny* later elaborated by Freud in his essay *The Uncanny*. Freud defines the term as not being at home and the concept was taken by a lot of thinkers Heidegger use the term 'Unheimlich' to denote this view. Madison uses this concept in his theory and took examples from Freud and Heidegger to prove

“not being at home as existential” (Madison 27).

When a person is convinced by the taken-for-granted appearances of life, he creates an impression covering the uncanniness of existence. Living in accordance with the familiar accepted conventions offers a ‘tranquillized self-assurance’ (Stambaugh 189), a feeling of being at home in which life is obvious, unremarkable, and pleasing. Anxiety or angst springs at unexpected situations and gives rise to the uncanny feeling where existential facets of ‘Heimlich’ find expression. Heidegger like Freud talks of darkness as one of the conditions that elicit this phenomenon to which Madison agrees. The consumerist modern world offers an extensive catalogue of pre-packaged opportunities to cushion the experience of uncanniness. Existential migration is likely to be an expression of this uncanniness rather than fleeing from it. In an alien land, available modes of tranquillisation do not easily convince all the migrants that life is as it appears, straightforward and meaningful. The intense desire to find the unknown always occupies the human mind. The desire gets acute representation in the process of migration as a phenomenon.

Existentialism is one of the important elements in post-colonial writings. The identity, culture and tradition were displaced and dislocated in most of the countries due to colonialism and people were forced to migrate for their persistence. Existential sufferings are one of the characteristics of most post-colonial nations. Colonialism makes colonial nations an amalgamation of mixed traditions and cultures that equip some of the people of post-colonial society with the burden to find true existence. The sense of longing for one’s identity, origin and home becomes more apparent in the post-colonial society where most people migrate to other lands for survival and existence to show the relationship of conflicts between the inner self and materialistic society and also the problems faced by migrants. The forced migration leads to the reiteration of bonding between humans and their immediate environment because their identity and personality are deeply attached to their surroundings. Morocco is one of the post-colonial nations, renounced by her children for the enjoyment of amenities of other nations. The process of migration, the sufferings of migrants and issues of home are recurrent theme in Moroccan literature. Bensalem Himmich’s *A Muslim Suicide* (2011), Mohammed Berrada’s *The Game of Forgetting* (1996), Laila Lalami’s *Secret Son* (2009), Youssef Fadel’s *A Shimmering Red Fish Swims with Me: A Novel* (2019), Driss Chraïbi’s *The Simple Past* (1952), Abdelrahim Lahbib’s *The Journeys of ‘Abdi, Known as Son of Hamriya* (2013) are some of the Moroccan literary works that illustrate cruel faces of migration, the existential crisis of migrants and issues of the home. Tahar ben

Jelloun is one of the greatest living writers of Morocco whose works exemplify the psychological turmoil and psychic turbulences of migrants, their strenuous efforts for existence and their longing for home.

The paper analyses Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel *The Last Friend* within the framework of existential migration theory to understand the psyche of migrants and the essence of human existence in the post-colonial scenario. Ben Jelloun carefully uses the strands of imagination to weave the texture of migrant feelings, emotions and mental crises. In post-colonial nations, their home itself raises questions about their existence. People from Morocco cross borders to find meaning in their life and to breathe the fresh air of freedom. Their sufferings in the foreign land were not less than that of their native land. However, home and family always have a deep impact on the lives of human beings which is unavoidable and unforgettable.

People find solace and peace at home albeit they travel to other nations seeking happiness. The unendurable situations in their life that never let them have a smooth flow of their lives were the cardinal reason that prompts the people in Morocco to step out of their homes. The idea is exemplified in most of the works of Tahar ben Jelloun. The primary thought of the migrants while leaving their homeland is that the new land will eradicate their problems and change their lives into joyous life. They climb the ladder with many expectations and desires and in this euphoric state, they lose themselves in the superficial beauty and facilities of alien lands. Their dream and hopes get devastated when they realize that the new land is not up to their expectations. The realization that they are aloof from their culture and traditions and the feeling of uneasiness to going back to it make them frustrated and victims of inner conflicts that question the meaning of their existence.

The novel gives a lucid account of the lived experiences of migrants and their openness to experience difference and foreignness through the life of Mohamed (Mamed). Most people have the curiosity to know the unknown world and may explore their attention towards the luxuries of foreign countries. Madison while interviewing certain migrants understood that they possess "affinity for alterity, in the guise of curiosity about difference, attraction to the foreign and unfamiliar, coupled with disdain for the known and familiar" (Madison 104). Thus the attraction towards difference makes one different and separates one from one's motherland and instigating the desirability to associate with alien lands. Mamed, unlike his best friend Ali was ambitious enough to embrace foreign scents. Ali once remembers the words of Mamed "He agreed with me that it would

be good for him to leave the familiarity of Tangier to advance his professional life elsewhere. So he left for Stockholm” (53). Then Mamed migrated to Spain feeling that his life will soon be spoiled if he stayed in Morocco. The Moroccan government is so restrictive and at the same time corruptive. Mamed settled in Sweden as a doctor after finishing his graduation in medicine. The enthusiasm towards newness and difference didn’t hinder one’s love towards the homeland. Mamed’s undying love towards his birthplace still stands though he left his motherland and this is evident in his daily conversation with Ali. Ali tells about their conversation “He recommended books and films he was able to see before they came to Tangier. I caught him up on the local gossip. He liked to know what was happening while he was gone. It was as though tangier belonged to him” (58). Mamed is a highly qualified doctor and he thought of having a pretty luxurious life which he wants to get as early as possible. The main attraction to Sweden for Mamed was its administrative system and government policies that equip the qualified hands with adorable sums. His initial conversations with his friend were so alluring about Sweden. He says:

It was a real democracy, he said, without corruption, without lies from the government, no beggars in the streets, very few alcoholics. The Scandinavian sense of civil rights was the stuff of dreams for an Arab or Mexican, he told me, and immigrants were given the opportunity to learn Swedish, to have decent housing, and to be a citizen like anyone else. (64-65)

Mamed adored the better living conditions, freedom and real justice provided there but the basic question is “...is he happy?” (65). Here come the notions of existential migration, certain events evoke in migrants the feeling of uncanniness that causes repressed emotions such as anxiety, fear, despair and so on to take action. The nostalgia towards his homeland and the bond he has with his surroundings in his native land triggers him to return home. Mamed is comfortable with his migrated land, he is not satisfied. He told “I miss the smells, the morning scents, the sounds, the nameless faces we see every day, the warmth of the sky and the people. I’m really torn” (65). His wife adapts to the new society, she makes friends and enjoys her privileged status. Unlike his wife and children he was caught by existential thoughts that made him solitude and aloof him from material pursuits. The attitude of his family towards the new social situation prevents his mind to go back to his mother land. His feeling of not being at home was too strong to bear which makes him mad especially when he met with other Moroccans who are having the same feeling. He says:

I'm the one who's dying of boredom. I miss Tangier, I hate to admit to this ridiculous nostalgia...I'm not the only one. Whenever I met other Moroccans in Sweden, the only thing they talk about is morocco. They think nothing has changed. It's nostalgia. They find spices in the Iranian and Turkish markets and make *tagines*. "Moroccans in Sweden are not satisfied". (66)

Whenever he got time he used to visit Tangier and open up about his feelings, emotions and sufferings with his friend Ali. He feels that he has begun losing his culture and tradition which leads to the realisation that his existence and identity are insecure there. Migrant's sufferings are of two folds- physical and mental. Nothing can be as soothing as home even if migrants are secured with material prospects. Home has an important role in building one's individuality and personality. "M. Heidegger (1971) argued that "dwelling" is not only a routine activity that people perform at home but also is a way of existing in the world. Independently on whether the individual spends time at home or is away from it; the very home image, "home archetype", influences their personality" (Bochaver 4).It doesn't mean that those who are enjoying with earthly pleasure, needs to enjoy eternal happiness and mental satisfaction. This is evident in the migrant life of Mamed. He was not only sad at his condition but also was powerless to teach his children the value and meaning of his tradition and true identity. Migrants are helpless in the attitudes and behaviours of their children which is entirely different from them and others of their children's age at native land. Ben Jelloun makes his character Mamed as the spokesman for the whole migrants to generalise their dilemmas, mental agony, frustrations and sufferings.Mamed opened his mind to his friend Ali:

I think I've made a mistake, he said. "I never should have left Morocco for Sweden. I'm lost. I've seen how you can live differently, and in many ways better than here, but it's not my culture, not my traditions. My wife and children have adapted better than I have. I'm depressed there, unhappy here, dissatisfied everywhere. The whole thing has been a failure. I'm not well.My children don't speak a word of Arabic, even though they're supposed to have learned it at school. They think of Morocco as a vacation place. I don't want to grow old in Sweden. (69)

When Mamed reflects on the time he left home he now feels that he become nothing, just a thought or sound. He lost everything he values and those he kept close to his heart. He recognises that he lost his old wife who

now becomes a new person forgetting the traditions, rituals and customs of his homeland. The children are also far way from their roots; they are not Moroccans but Swedish in all aspects and they consider Morocco is just an ancestral land or vacation place for them unlike Mamed. The attitude of his wife and children towards the new situation reminds him that he loses his origins, traditions, rituals and customs of his homeland. The concept of home is entirely different for both the father and children. That definition of the concept of home indeed varies from person to person. "Human life is always "being-in-the-world," and place (including home) contributes to the person's existence" (Bochaver 3). Home has an important role in providing meaning for human existence. Migrants move to other nations as they fail to acknowledge their true home and hope to find one in their next destination. Foreigners always rest as foreigners in a foreign land and the realisation of this fact led migrants to introspect themselves where they find their relationship between themselves and their native place. The realisation takes them to the memories of their motherland and evokes in them nostalgic feelings which ultimately leads to trauma and pain-stacking feelings.

The trauma that he faces due to existentialism and identity crisis impacts his mind and it causes to deteriorate his health conditions. As existential migration theory states Mamed too thought of returning home many times and his feelings on such thoughts were exciting and at the same time depressing too. The thought that dissuades him from going back home is that he doubts whether his wife and children join him because they all set their paths to follow. He dares not to lose his family, wife and children once more because he knows that being a migrant he lost his motherland and family members. His pathetic and desperate situation is evident in his conversation with Ali. "I doubt my wife and children will join me, but we all have our paths to follow." He punctuated his words with a nervous, dry cough" (69).

Existentialism summons all psychic disturbances and ingrained feelings and ultimately makes the person victorious when finding the true purpose of life. Existential migration states that most of the migrants journeyed through the path of intense darkness in search of a ray of light, hoping that it can be their companion for the rest of the journey. Mamed also seeks to find the light but his servitude of emotions captivates him not to attain it. His openness towards difference and foreignness gives him just a temporary relief even though he was well fit in society. The difference he found in Sweden that distinguishes it from his homeland, is the scope of high income and education. It made him so blind that he couldn't see

his tradition, heritage and identity were strongly built inside him which he realised at the later stages of his life and immersed into depression feeling that his existence is questioned. When one is ready to experience and accept the differences, it reflects in oneself either negatively or positively. Some migrants feel relieved when adapting new culture and living in a multicultural nation because in them migration signifies a deeply felt searching or yearning that expresses and addresses their existence itself while in some others they didn't get what they expected from the alien lands and evoke nostalgia. Mamed was such an immigrant he was so happy to leave the nation but during the later stages of life in Sweden, he felt isolated in a heterogeneous nation and hopes to re-join the motherland.

Human beings mostly possess the quality of escapism that compels them to find excuses to find relief rather than facing harsh reality. The American Psychology Association defines escapism as "the tendency to escape from the real world to the safety and comfort of a fantasy world" (). It can be considered as a coping skill when used positively but ignoring reality is detrimental. Migrants use various methods of escapism to cope with difficult situations in life. Some of them choose escapist strategies such as reading books, participating in parties, intake of drugs and alcohol, gardening, exercising, and meditating and those who are on the verge of depression thought of comparing their homeland and migrated land to escape from reality. Mamed belongs to the last category, his comparisons over Morocco and Sweden give him a temporary relief to prove himself his decision was right. Mamed always compares his nation with Sweden to have a self-relief and to reiterate that he left the nation for the good that has a good life, health facilities and proper education for his children. He knows that Sweden is far better than Morocco in every aspect and despite all attempts to epitomise Sweden he fails to feel at home there. Gradually he took relief in tobacco and cigarettes which subsequently makes him a lung patient. Swedish medicines were very much helpful for his lung problems but he was heretofore suffering from the incurable disease of homesickness. He says:

I told myself I should stop comparing these two countries. They did not have the same history, climate, or fate. Even if Swedish medicine was remarkable, I wanted to go home to Morocco. How could I explain this need, this burning sensation, this clog that blocked everything in my chest? ...I didn't want to worry him, to plunge him into despair. All I said was that I missed the wind from the east, I missed the dust of Tangier. (150)

As time passed his life was more and more pushed into despair and finally, he, lose control over everything and died. He wished that though he can't stay in his homeland during his flowering years at least his dead body must remain in the hereditary land. Mamed never witnessed migrant discrimination or problems from peer groups, he got a well-paid job, reputation, adorable house and life situations but he could understand only during his last days that all these fortunes were ransom fees for captivating and destroying one's traditions and roots. So he thinks that by his death he can join his ancestral land, find happiness and get salvation for his soul. He says:

As soon as Mamed learned that his case was hopeless, he had a passionate desire to leave Sweden in order to die in the family home. He believed Moroccan soil was better suited to the dead than the glacial soil of Scandinavia. He no longer had the energy to compare the two countries, to criticize everything that didn't work in Morocco. He wanted to stand once more on the soil of the country he carried in his heart. (168)

Mamed was buried in the cemetery of "the Mujahideen, the freedom fighters" (174). The reasons lead him to depression and finally take away his life was the questions of existence, identity, uncanniness and other related problems. Existential migration theory ponders on the inner turmoil and conflicts of a migrant and his undying love towards his homeland which he left for existential motives. Home as a place or situation that makes individuals perceive peace and be relieved is a very basic concept of the theory. Mamed experienced that most of the Moroccan migrants in Sweden are having the same plight and despite they suffered a lot in their country they have a staunch bonding with their root nation. "They all told me the same thing. They missed Morocco, even if they had suffered there. It's strange, this strong, neurotic relationship we have with our homeland" (180). The theory not only speaks of the physical sufferings but takes readers deep inside where the existential aspects originate.

Mamed addresses the whole migrant community and their sufferings. Tahar Ben Jelloun brilliantly portrays his character to demonstrate the contemporary relevant social phenomenon, migration and its cruel faces. The existential crisis and dilemmas though differ from person to person, everyone pesters around the same underlying aspect of longing for their homes. Alluring beauty and enchanting sights are the attraction of man in all times. If the wings of dreams are large it may spring to distant places. Most of the migrants are dreamy persons who expect more comfortable

life as well as material progress and prosperity rather than hardships and uncanniness. Really this notion is an oasis and they compelled to face many hardships and hard realities in life. Tahar Ben Jelloun's characters have no exception. Especially the character Mamed who has an expectation of having richness in life and also like to lead the life of western culture.

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