University of Chitral
JOURNAL OF LINGUISTICS AND LITERATURE
CrossMark
ISSN INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER
p 2617-3611
e 2663-1512
Crossref

Journal homepage: https://jll.uoch.edu.pk/index.php/jll/index

From Determinism to Volition: An Existentialist Study of Nilovna in Maxim Gorky's *Mother*

[1]Zohaib Amir, [2]Syed Hanif Rasool, [3]Ahmed Jalal

[1]M.Phil. Scholar, Department of English, Khushal Khan Khattak University, Karak
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Khushal Khan Khattak University, Karak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
[3]Lecturer, Department of English, Edwardes College, Peshawar

ARTICLE INFO

*Corresponding author: A. Jalal
mir_ahmad_jalal@yahoo.com

Keywords:
Volition,
Existentialism,
Sartre,
bad faith,
Nilovna,
Maxim Gorky,
Mother

ABSTRACT

Women in the pre-revolution Russia lived in a miserable predicament. Relegated to subservient positions, they were denied volition, were often treated like slaves, and were left at the mercy of fate. This social crisis finds voice in Russian fiction which is on most occasions reflective of women's plight: Maxim Gorky's *Mother* is one such instance. It examines the tragic plight of the Russian women in the pre-revolution milieu. This paper reads the female protagonist of *Mother,* Nilovna in light of the existentialist notions, mainly those espoused by Jean-Paul Sartre, exploring how Nilovna finds her way out from sheer passivity and deterministic domesticity to the world of possibility and volition by marching forth with the revolutionaries, playing her significant role in the revolutionary movement. Using the broad theorization of existentialism, focusing precisely on Sartre's notions of bad faith and choice of free will, the study explores how a miserable woman in her existentialist journey traverses from the mundane domesticity to the purposeful revolution as an active political worker committed to the cause of revolution. The study foregrounds how Nilovna finds a purpose in her meaningless and passive life by helping her son who becomes a socialist after his father's death.

Introduction

Born into a poor Russian family in the city of Nizhny Novgorod and regarded as one of the most represented Russian writers, Alexie Maximovich Peshkov (1868-1936) alias Maxim Gorky (henceforth called Gorky) received the fame of one of the world's most famous writers of the early 20th century. The reputation was quite legitimate as he remained a five-time nominee for the Nobel Prize in literature. Known for his depiction of social outcasts, Gorky is regarded as the founder of socialist realism as he recounts the bitter life of the oppressed and wretched people of early twentieth-century Russia. The thematic depth of Gorky's writing is probably the result of his own intimate experience of miserable life: he experienced oppression, exploitation, and hardship in his life since childhood. Becoming an orphan at the age of five, he was forced to work by his grandfather at the tender age of eight; later, he worked as a baker, as an assistant in a shoemaker's shop, as a dishwasher, and as a courier for painters. He was often bullied by others and even made to spend many hungry nights. The experience he acquired from different workplaces and tours across Russia gave him insight into Russian society which influenced his writings.

Gorky started his literary career in 1891 when he published his first short story in Tiflis. His fame arose from his early romantic stories from the 1890s. His play *The Lower Depths* (1902) gained widespread popularity in Russia and Europe while his autobiographical masterpiece *Childhood* (1914) attracted millions of readers worldwide. *Mother*, however, is regarded as the most famous of Gorky's works, but "ironically" it is also considered one of the most "aesthetically" defective works (Mikolchak, 531). According to Mikolchak when Gorky was on a trip to America in 1906, he wrote this novel. It was the time "when the defeat of the first Russian revolution of 1905 became apparent

and expressed in it a clear political agenda of raising the spirit of the proletarian movement and combating the defeatist moods among the revolutionaries" (531).

Mother is regarded as the most remarkable novel of Gorky, recounting real-life happenings during a 1902 May Day demonstration in Sormovo, Gorky's native town which is now named Gorky. It is believed that Gorky's distant relative has inspired the mother of *Mother*, Anna Zalomova for it was "Anna Zalomova, the mother of Piotr Zalomov," who followed "her son into revolutionary activity after his arrest by the tsarist police" (Mikolchak, 531-2). The critic also believes that Gorky visited Anna's family when the former was a child, thus Gorky felt a personal connection with the story of his novel, *Mother*.

The novel depicts the life of a female Russian factory worker characterized by "hard labour, poverty, hunger, and sickness" whose husband, who is a bully, dies soon leaving her to raise her only son, Pavel, who would repeat his father's life (Mikolchak, 531-2). Pavel however soon stops drinking and starts bringing home books. The books scare illiterate Nilovna but she helps him nevertheless. Gorky emphasizes the potential of an uneducated woman to overcome conventional ignorance to achieve political insight and will to fight an oppressive regime. Hence, it is Nilovna who appears to be the protagonist of the novel though it is Pavel who is revolutionary. The message is clear: "If uneducated, oppressed, and scared old women go into revolution, it is the only way for any person in Russia. Mother and son are united not only by their blood bondage, but, most importantly, by their joint revolutionary ideals and activities" (531-2).

Humans try to create meaning for things in a meaningless venture of life. To bring sense of this often-turbulent world, existentialist philosophers attempt to settle for their understanding of the questions of complex nature, mainly diffusing through the medium of literature. Existentialist literature is characterised by attempts to seek meaning in an apparently chaotic and seemingly meaningless environment, emphasising the notion that one can determine one's purpose in this world. Of the several notions of existentialism, the Sartrean notion of existentialism has been used as a tool to investigate the existentialist journey of a woman from mundane domesticity to the purposeful revolution as an active political worker committed to the cause of revolution.

Highlighting the existential struggle of Nilovna, emphasizing her transformation from deterministic domesticity to the volitional revolutionary struggle, this paper views her existential leap as a quest for meaning in the protagonist's life. Hypothesising that Maxim Gorky's *Mother* signifies the existentialist journey of a miserable woman, Nilovna, caught in horrible conditions of a painful life as a wife of a drunkard and brutal man. Left in a void after the death of her cruel husband, Nilovna finds her way out from the prosaic and mundane routine of a widow to the purposeful venture of a progressive and revolutionary mother. The paper attempts to answer these two questions:

1. How and to what extent does Nilovna of Maxim Gorky's *Mother* undergo bad faith by denying her innate freedom as a sentient human being?

2. How and to what extent does Nilovna rise from her deterministic conditions to her conscious volition by actively and purposefully participating in the political struggle of the revolutionaries?

Significance

The study is significant in many respects: it offers to scholars the possibility to approach a masterpiece of one of the world's most famous Russian writers, emphasizing on the several possibilities of using Russian literature in translation to offer comparative grounds in literary explorations; it brings to the fore the political aspect of a literary work; it highlights the political struggle of an illiterate mother setting an example for other women to get out of the mundane passivity; it deals with the fundamental human existential concerns that are common to all people around the globe.

Research Methodology

Grounding on the aforementioned discussion and theoretical implications, this article takes Sartre's unceasing concerns with the issues of freedom, commitment, and moral responsibility as an existentialist answer to the question of the meaningless life of Nilovna, the female protagonist, in Gorky's *Mother*. The study, by employing textual analysis as a research method, analyses the speech and action of the protagonist, Nilovna, to navigate her odyssey of self-actualization. Qualitative in nature and involving the analysis of the text of *Mother*, the article deals with the in-depth investigation of the existential crises of Nilovna, the protagonist, in the light of Sartre's existential

theorization, focusing on his notion of bad faith. The study will use themes, characters, dialogues, settings, and plot of the *Mother* to explore the aforementioned hypotheses answering the questions in light of the broad theorization as mentioned in the theoretical framework of this study. The analyses will also take into consideration the various implications of the journey of a wretched woman from determinism to volition and from the quagmire of bad faith to authentic experience, (a state Sartre calls so). Doing such, the scope of the study will be enlarged, as the philosophy of existentialism demands, to encompass man's fundamental existential problems such as psychological pain, freedom of choice, freedom of action and meaning of life.

Literature Review

Few recent intellectual and philosophical trends have aroused as much interest and stirred up as much controversy as existentialism throwing its impact beyond the academy, in the broader spheres of humanities, politics, theology, psychology, and Asian mysticism, particularly in the fields of art and literature. The philosophy of human existence flourished originally in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s and then in France in the decade after World War II. According to Michelman, "[t]he operative meaning of existentialism here is thus broader than it was around 1945, when the term first gained currency in France as a label for the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre" (p. xiii). Nevertheless, "it is considerably less broad than the view proposed by commentators in the1950s and 1960s who, in an attempt to overcome Sartre's hegemony, discovered the seeds of existentialism far and wide from Shakespeare to French, German, and Russian creative writers (p.xiii).

Dr. Neelam Bhardwaj in her research article, "Maxim Gorky's Mother through the lens of Marxist Feminism"(2016) highlights the symbolic significance of Gorky's *Mother* in the socialist movement in Russia and explores Pelagea Nilovna's transformative journey from a passive mother to an active revolutionary. Emphasizing Pelagea Nilovna's pivotal role, the paper highlights her evolution and active participation in the revolutionary movement, catalyzed by her son Pavel's involvement. It discusses her engagement in distributing forbidden literature and her martyrdom as symbolic of Mother Russia's embrace of socialist ideals. Furthermore, the paper examines the portrayal of other female characters, such as Natasha, Sasha, Ludmila, and Sophia, to underscore Gorky's glorification of Marxist-Feminism and the diverse facets of women's involvement in the proletarian struggle.

In conclusion, Dr. Neelam Bhardwaj positions *Mother* as a significant work of socialist realism, advocating for a multi-dimensional reading that integrates both Marxist and feminist perspectives. The paper contributes to understanding the intersection of gender and class struggles in revolutionary contexts, reinforcing the importance of *Mother* in the discourse on women's liberation within socialist movements. Javed Akhter however considers Bhardwaj's view as restricted in his article, "Characterisation of Women in Maxim Gorky's Novel *Mother*: A Marxistst Feminist Perspective ". He, therefore, extends the Marxist argument and offers a more detailed analysis by perspectivising the novel from Marxist feminist angle, concluding that Gorky has skillfully shattered the archconservative and ascetic stereotypes of women's roles in the early 20th century Russian society where women's condition was pitiable and deplorable. His revolutionary female characters are working against the brutal patriarchal conditions of gender and class established by the bourgeois. The research paper highlights the interconnectedness of women's liberation and class struggle, arguing that Gorky's portrayal underscores the need for socialism to achieve true emancipation for women. It also compares Gorky's approach to female characters with other works of Russian literature, emphasising his revolutionary feminist perspective. The conclusion asserts that Gorky's female characters challenge traditional patriarchal stereotypes and advocate for a socialist revolution as the path to women's liberation.

Dr. Mohammed Humed Mohammed Bulghaith's critical appraisal of Maxim Gorky's "Mother" provides an insightful analysis of the portrayal of women as archetypal figures of challenge and fortitude within the context of Russian societal transformation. The paper examines the evolving consciousness and awareness of women regarding their societal roles, influenced by various historical, social, economic, cultural, and political factors. The paper's central objective is to examine Gorky's depiction of women in "Mother" and explore their pursuit of identity and liberation amidst societal upheavals. Bulghaith argues that the novel plays a pivotal role in capturing the journey of women reclaiming their identities and rights, which have long been denied to them. The researcher is motivated by the compelling portrayal of women in Gorky's work and the emergence of a new type of female character. Through an in-depth analysis of characters like Nilovna, Natasha, Sashenka, and Sofya, the paper highlights Gorky's portrayal

of women as catalysts for political, social, and domestic transformations. Bulghaith contends that Gorky's depiction embodies ideals of women's emancipation and empowerment, with characters representing a departure from traditional gender roles. Moreover, the paper argues that Gorky's portrayal of women challenges conventional notions of complementarity between genders, advocating instead for women to supplement men. The author asserts that Gorky's narrative reflects the socio-political turmoil of his time and illustrates the initial steps towards the emergence of a new, empowered woman.

Virginia Bennet in her article, "MAKSIM GOR'KIJ'S "MAT": A Primer for Consciousness Raising" explores the psychological and political aspects of the novel, predominantly focusing upon the historical events overwhelming 20th century Russia. The article spotlights the "interior transformation" of the characters extending beyond "the boundaries of private life into the realm of public activities" (83). While other critics like Angela Brint Linger primarily concern themselves with the notion of war and the hero in the Russian 20th century. In the first chapter of the book the author theorises that *Mother* is a prototype for the socialist realist fiction (34).Rasool et al., in the article, 'Rukhsana Ahmad's "The Gatekeeper's Wife": An ExistentialistStudy of a Western Woman's Experience of the South Asian Mystique' explore the storyfrom the Sartrean notion of existentialism, spotlighting how the story maps Annette's plight of being tangled in an unsuccessful marriage with a Lahore-based rich man. The article highlights how despite "living in an affluent and luxurious environment", Annette "finds herself alienated and secluded" and thereby she attempts to "escape the burden of her lonely life" by keeping "herself "busy with animals at the zoo" (4-5). Analyzing the existentialist interpretation of the story, Rasool et al. argue "mysterious nature" of the incident in which the Cheetah allows the Gatekeeper's wife to take meat from its captivity in the zoo, foregrounding how this act of Cheetah has taken Annette to her "existentialist sojourn into the unfathomable South Asian mystique" (1-10). This paper concludes "that Annette gets awareness of her own existence in the time of her own inner emotional strain and anxiety, analyzing "existentialist impacts on the story from the views of two major exponents of existentialism; Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55) and Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980)" (Rasool, 1-10).

Jean-Paul Sartre's Notion of Existentialism

Jean-Paul Sartre, an eminent French philosopher, novelist, and dramatist is widely known for his kind of existentialism focusing "on the human experience of freedom and responsibility in a godless universe'' (Leitch 1196). According to Sartre, existence is before essence: because the world and human nature possess no fixed meaning; human beings are responsible for creating their own meanings through free choice and action. The experience of literature, Sartre argues, is precisely the experience of this freedom, an experience that draws together the author and reader into the collaborative, future-oriented project of human existence, which is always in a state of becoming (Leitch, 1196). To Sartre, existence is "contingent and unfixed'' and human beings "conscious of the limits" of their knowledge and mortality live with "existential dread" caught in the situation with the burden of " the freedom to choose" but always about the particular situation at hand (Leitch, 1197).

Referring to the aforementioned general notion of Sartrean existentialism, it can be argued that "humans have no nature" and that they "are absolutely free, and are blessed (or cursed) with monstrous spontaneity of consciousness" and "that absolute freedom generates free-floating anxiety and the need to create meaningfulness through arbitrary commitment" (Earle, 272-3). Explicating the same, Cuddon maintains a comprehensive view of Sartre's notion of existence: man is born into "a kind of void, a mud" and that he has "the liberty to remain in this mud and thus lead a passive, supine, acquiescent existence in a 'semiconscious' state and in which he is scarcely aware of himself", but "he may come out of his subjective, passive situation (in which case he would 'stand out from'), become increasingly aware of himself and, conceivably, experience angoisse (a species of metaphysical and moral anguish)" (317). Cuddon adds that in such a situation, man "would then have a sense of the absurdity of his predicament and suffer despair" and the "energy deriving from this awareness would enable him to 'drag himself out of the mud', and begin to exist" (317). Reiterating further, Cuddon argues that by using "his power of choice" man gives "meaning to existence and the universe" and becomes "obliged to make himself what he is, and has to be what he is". Cuddon emphasises that Sartre in *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946), has "expressed the belief that man can emerge from his passive and indeterminate condition and, by an act of will, become engagé; whereupon he is committed (through engagement) to some action and part in social and political life" and through such "commitment man provides a reason and a structure for his existence and thus helps to integrate society (Cuddon, 317). The aforementioned argument can be

recapitulated in Sartre's words: "If we define man's situation as one of free choice, in which he has no recourse to excuses or outside aid, then any man who takes refuge behind his passions, any man who fabricates some deterministic theory, is operating in bad faith" (47).

Discussion

Considering Nilovna as the protagonist of the novel, the paper views three important phases of her life: first as a victim of both her drunkard husband's oppression and the deterministic domesticity; second as a widow lost in her passivity and deterministic circumstances and as a mother of a youth who is groping for some purpose in his life; third as an awakening woman who has discovered her own self as a free human being having the potential to shape her destiny. It is in this phase that she has found both the meaning and the purpose of her existence and has risen as "the mother" of the revolutionaries.

In her role as the wife of a cruel drunkard, Nilovna looks to her life as a writ of fate, treating herself as a determined entity, bearing and accepting all the odds as external to herself and regarding herself as the chief subject rather than as an agent of destruction. Quite early in the novel, Gorky draws the prosaic, mundane and cruel living conditions of Nilovna tortured and abused by her husband's episodic outbursts of anger. Thus, Nilovna's husband, Michael Vlasov, can be witnessed abusing his wife by calling her: "you dirty vermin" (07) proving himself to be a misogynist. In fact, she is considered inferior to the pet dog. Contrary to abusing his wife, Vlasov can be seen upon "returning home drunk" sitting down to supper, and giving "his dog to eat from his own bowl", never beating the pet. She endures all the hardships, miseries and brutality of her husband in silence for Gorky writes, "she [i]s accustomed to submit [to it] without thought" (14). Nilovna's plight can be explicated in light of Sartre's existentialist notion of "Bad Faith" for she "has no recourse to excuses or outside aid" and has to seek "refuge behind h[er] passions" (Sartre, 47). Humans have the ability to transcend a particular situation. Our being, According to Sartre, is much bigger, embracing every possibility, whereas in bad faith one keeps such possibilities out of mind and one believes that the way we are at the moment is the only way we can be. Such a situation limits one's freedom.

The death of her husband marks the start of a new life for Nilovna. It is however filled with horrid memories of her past, like a terrible nightmare reminiscing her utter dejection and helplessness. At this stage she feels as if she has almost lost the meaning in her life for she cannot help contemplating the affliction and brutal treatment of her husband. After her husband's death, her son, Pavel, to her dismay first adopts his father's ways; but, with the passage of time, Pavel's interests change. He abandons all his bad habits by relinquishing drinking and quitting going to the evening parties. He transforms himself into a different human being with the passage of time, much different from his youth days. Gorky describes how she feels "glad to see her son turning out different from all the other factory youth", but at the same time, "a feeling of anxiety and apprehension" stirs "in her heart when she observes that Pavel "obstinately and resolutely directing his life into obscure paths leading away from the routine existence about him - that he turned in his career neither to the right nor the left" (12). Sometimes the mother notices that Pavel has copied a passage from the book "on a piece of paper" and he has tried to hide that from her (12). "But her uneasiness" increases with every passing day and "her son's strangeness" is not clarified with time", her heart becomes more and more sharply troubled with a foreboding of something unusual" and every now and then she feels "a certain dissatisfaction with him" (13). It is at this stage that Gorky describes his mother's intense emotional condition in these words: "All people are like people, and he is like a monk. He is so stern. It's not according to his years" (13). Mother is hesitant to ask Pavel about all these things and her strange, worrisome and anxious life that she has been bearing for two years. And now she takes the courage to ask Paval about his renewed interests such as readings. She implores. "I want to ask you," speaking softly, "what you read all the time" (14). Sitting down beside him and "straightening herself into an attitude of intense, painful expectation waited for something momentous" (14). Responding to his mother's desperate enquiry, Pavel replies that he is "reading forbidden books", they "are forbidden to be read because they tell the truth about our -- about the workingmen's life" and "[t]hey are printed in secret, and if I am found with them I will be put in prison because I want to know the truth" (14).

Pavel continues addressing his mother. He beseeches what kind of a life she has lived and that now she is "forty years old" and that she has not "lived" her own life (15). He recalls the bad days when his father would "beat" his mother, avenging "his wretchedness on her "body", "the wretchedness of his life" that was "pressed upon him" (14). Gorky recounts the revolutionary transformation of Pavel's life when his mother would listen to him with earnest

surprise: his eyes burning "with a beautiful radiance", leaning "forward on the table" moving "nearer to his mother" "looking straight into her face, wet with tears", Pavel delivers "his maiden "speech to her about the truth which he had now come to understand" (15). Gorky depicts Pavel's conditions when he with "the naivete of youth, and the ardour of a young student" feels "proud of his knowledge, religiously confiding in its truth" speaking "about everything" that is "clear to him" and speaking "not so much for his mother as to verify and strengthen his own opinions" (15). At times Pavel would halt, "finding no words, and then he would see "before him a disturbed face", in which dimly shone a pair of kind eyes clouded with tears" looking "on with awe and perplexity" (15). Alluding to the miserable episodes of his mother's life, Pavel asks his mother," [w]hat joys did you know?". . . "What sort of a past can you recall?" to which she listen and shake her head dolefully, "feeling something new, unknown to her, both sorrowful and gladsome, like a caress to her troubled and aching heart" and it seems for the first time she hears "such language about herself, her own life" and it awakens "in her misty, dim thoughts, long dormant; gently roused an almost extinct feeling of rebellion, perplexed dissatisfaction- thoughts and feelings of a remote youth" (15). While discussing her life's miseries "with her neighbors" and speaking "a great deal about everything" she has included and only complained, and "no one explained why life was so hard and burdensome" (15).

When Pavel finishes his speech, his mother at first seems unable to understand the matters, but soon she gathers a great deal of matter explained by her son "pertaining to to herself"; all he says "about her own woman's existence" is "bitterly familiar and true"; hence, it seems "to her that every word of his was perfectly true, and her bosom" throbs "with a gentle sensation" warming "it more and more with an unknown, kindly caress" (15). The aforementioned conversation with her son is followed by a meeting which is the turning point in Nilovna's life. It was the moment she was introduced to something new, which later on completely changed her life. Pavel and his comrades start conducting meetings every Saturday in Pavel's house. Mother is also introduced to new peoples, among them was another girl, Sashenka. This environment immensely influenced her. Once while in a meeting she hears Sashenka saying, "We are socialists!". This makes her "dumb fright" because she knows who socialists are. In her youth days some people killed the Czar and called themselves Socialists. These people say that "the landlords, wishing to revenge themselves on the Czar for liberating the peasant serfs, had vowed not to cut their hair until the Czar should be killed" (33).

The meetings increase in number and frequency, now happening twice a week. Mother gets more and more interested in them. After the comrades leave, she discusses politics and those matters she was unable to understand during the meeting. While listening to speeches of her son and other comrades from the city "she forgot her fears" (34). Gorky shows that the small room becomes home to all the workers where feeling of kinship are begotten and shared among the workers of the world, where the difference between a master and a slave vanishes, and where all kind of previous prejudices are ended; thus, all the participants find themselves introduced to a new kind of liberty and life. This feeling of kinship and liberty embraces all the participants: notably, the mother, who feels rejuvenated with remarkable energy marked youthful vigor, hope, joy and triumph (36).

Observing the aforementioned congeniality and compatibility, the mother feels that "in very truth a great dazzling light" has been "born into the world like the sun in the sky and visible to her eyes" (36). The mother gradually takes interest in her life and she feels as if her life is an important asset. She starts engaging more in the activities, to learn how to read and tries her best to understand the matter in order to be a helpful member of the group. During the "Muddy Penny" incident Pavel gives her a note to deliver it to the city to get the Muddy Penny story published in the newspaper. This was her first task and she was overwhelmed by it (63). During the incident Pavel leads a protest against the factory authority and consequently, gets arrested. During arresting Pavel, the gendarmes were very disrespectful towards him and his mother: "the yellow faced officer conducted himself as on the first occasion, insultingly, derisively, delighting in abuse, endeavoring to cut down to the very heart" (70). The aforementioned incident prompts her, driving her to be determined and resolute to the cause of standing by the oppressed.

Mother's existentialist sojourn suggests the solitary position of human beings in the universe. Man is on his own to change his adverse condition with no external source of objective value, fate or any other supernatural agency to help him. Now Nilovna proactively sets to certain dangerous ventures such as smuggling the illegal books to the factory which were used to be carried there by Pavel. It can be argued that Nilovna's transformation from deterministic domesticity to anti-deterministic revolution is an existentialist leap. In contrast to Nilovna's deterministic life as a

wife of Michael Vlasove, this transformation into an anti-deterministic outlook about human choices has made her perform her active role in politics. She is firm, determined and serious in her choices as a revolutionary. It is a willing shift from domesticity to revolution, from acceptance of oppression to standing against oppression. The following vigorous statement of mother reflects her existentialist quest.

> "I've thought all my life, 'Lord Christ in heaven! what did I live for?' Beatings, work! I saw nothing except my husband. I knew nothing but fear! And how Pasha grew I did not see, and I hardly know whether I loved him when my husband was alive. All my concerns, all my thoughts were centred upon one thing-to feed my beast, to propitiate the master of my life with enough food, pleasing to his palate, and served on time, so as not to incur his displeasure, so as to escape the terrors of a beating, to get him to spare me but once! But I do not remember that he ever did spare me. He beat me so-not as a wife is beaten, but as one whom you hate and detest. Twenty years I lived like that, and what was up to the time of my marriage I do not recall" (91-2).

Nilovna is heading to her new venture of exploring the possibilities of anti-deterministic outlook, finding before the light that seems to enlighten the darkness of her life. She realizes that her perspective on life is being transformed by the happenings and circumstances she has been experiencing since her husband's death, particularly after her son's active involvement in the revolution. Sharing her feelings with Andry Nakhodka, she tells her that she feels "pity for everybody", she has a different heart now and that her "soul has opened its eyes now" (93). Nilovna appreciates the people who have consecrated themselves to "a stern life for the sake of the people" and suffer "for the sake of truth", standing firm against the oppression and believing that "as long as there will be the rich, the people will get nothing, neither truth nor happiness, nothing" (93). Nilovna continues her existentialist quest, retrospecting her miserable past, contemplating her present mission of supporting the revolution and aspiring for her vision of the prosperous world free of any discrimination and poverty. She has found herself. She has discovered the purpose of her life, the aim of looking at the world with the vision of a revolutionary to change for better.

> Here am I living among you, while all this is going on. Sometimes at night my thoughts wander off to my past. I think of my youthful strength trampled underfoot of my young heart torn and beaten, and I feel sorry for myself and embittered. But for all that I live better now, I see myself more and more, I feel myself more. . . There, I am talking now, ..I talk and do not hear myself, don't believe my own ears! All my life I was silent, I always thought of one thing-how to live through theday apart, how to pass it without being noticed, so that nobody should touch me! And now I think about everything. Maybe I don't understand your affairs so very well; but all are near me, I feel sorry for all, and I wish well to all (93).

Cuddon explicates Sartre's vision of man's existence in which man is born into a kind of void, a mud and he has "the liberty to remain in this mud and thus lead a passive, supine, acquiescent existence in a 'semiconscious' state and in which he is scarcely aware of himself", but "he may come out of his subjective, passive situation (in which case he would 'stand out from'), become increasingly aware of himself and, conceivably, experience angoisse (a species of metaphysical and moral anguish)" (317). In such a situation, according to Cuddon, an individual would find itself in utter despair by being aware of itself caught in a predicament. The energy derived from this awareness would enable him to 'drag himself out of the mud', and begin to exist (317). Reiterating further, he adds that by using "his power of choice" man "can give meaning to existence and the universe" and becomes "obliged to make himself what he is, and has to be what he is" (317). Nilovna has thus discovered her will and strength. Gradually, she has become "conscious of her usefulness in this new life", "a consciousness" that has given her "poise and assurance" (120). Before this, she had never considered herself of any worth; she even knew, realizing her insignificance, that her husband could marry another woman at any moment for he did not care whether it was her or any other woman making preparing his meals. Even Pavel did not care about her when he grew up and started playing in the street. However, she was overwhelmed by this new feeling of significance, of being valuable to others, and she felt her head erect on her shoulders (120).

Arlette Elkaim Sartre, a French translator and editor, and who was adopted by Sartre, in her preface to 1996 French Edition of Sartre's *Existentialism is Humanism*, quotes Sartre, "[a] man who is free and one who is enslaved cannot be perceived from the same perspective" (xii). The miserable Nilovna as a wife of a drunkard and the revolutionary Nilovna as a mother of Pavel make an interesting contrast. Gorky develops her character gradually throughout the novel. It is as if the transformation of Nilovna is the existentialist quest burning at the heart of mother whose only purpose is revolution. After the May day demonstration mother participates in the protest alongside Pavel

and his other comrades carrying banners. Pavel and his comrades have been arrested during the protest leaving mother alone. The next morning Nikolay Ivanovich, Pavel's comrade arrives at her home and tells her that Pavel wants her to go to the city with him. He tells her to come over to his place and assure her that she will find ways to contribute to the cause. He asks her to get the address from Pavel in prison of those peasants asking for illegal books. Mother replies to him that she knows where they live and she will carry illegal books to those peasants, all he needs to do is just to arrange those books and leave the rest to her. Mother tells him that she will go everywhere and will "keep going summer and winter, down to [her] very grave, a pilgrim for the sake of truth" (191).

In the novel, when Nikolay informs mother of the dangers of the task she is taking, she refuses to surrender and affirms her association with the revolutionaries. She responds resolutely:

> My dear man, what have I to consider? What have I to live for if not for this cause? Of what use am I to anybody? A tree grows, it gives shade; it's split into wood, and it warms people. Even a mere dumb tree is helpful to life, and I am a human being. The children, the best blood of man, the best there is of our hearts, give up their liberty and their lives, and perish without pity for themselves! And I, a mother-am I to stand by and do nothing? (192).

Stephen Michelman maintains that Sartrean existentialism is "a philosophy of radical individual freedom, responsibility, and social commitment" seeking "to expose the hypocrisy of traditional, "serious" values, replacing "them with a doctrine of individual choice and creation" (14). In the city, Nilovna is busy with the revolutionaries, exchanging the odds of life they have had experienced in their past. Oftentimes, she engages in such conversations where she alludes to the bitter episodes of life when she was caught in the deterministic snare and when she was of the view that causes of her suffering were external to her will. Often in such long sallies of conversations, she would recount to Sofya and Nikolay of her tales "her poor life, her wrongs, and patient sufferings" and then would suddenly stop "in her narrative" and would contemplate as if she is "turning aside, away from herself, and speaking about somebody else" (207). These random thoughts and retrospection would leave Nilovna in a state of deep meditation. "In simple words, without malice, with a sad smile on her lips, she [would draw] the monotonous grey sketch of sorrowful days" enumerating "the beatings" she "received from her husband" and marveling "at the trifling causes" that "led to them and her own inability to avert them" (207). Both Sofya and Nikolay would listen to mother "in attentive silence, impressed by the deep significance of the unadorned story of a human being, who was regarded as cattle are regarded, and who, without a murmur, for a long time felt herself to be that which she was held to be" (207). It seems to them as "if thousands, nay millions, of lives spoke through her mouth" and mother's "existence had been commonplace and simple; but such is the simple, ordinary existence of multitudes, and her story, assuming ever larger proportions in their eyes, took on the significance of a symbol" (207). Thus absorbed in her recollections, mother draws to light "each daily wrong" from "her dim past" giving "a massive picture of the huge, dumb horror in which her youth had been sunk" (208). Even while she was living with the revolutionaries in the city, she was feeling contended although she knew that her son, and hundreds other revolutionaries it would occur to her, is in prison and a horrible sentence awaits him.

The figure of her son appeared to her absorbing all the people into his own destiny. The contemplative feeling aroused in her involuntarily and unnoticeably diverted her inward gaze away from him to all sides. Like thin, uneven rays it touched upon everything, tried to throw light everywhere, and make one picture of the whole (231). Nilovna's major contribution to the revolutionaries is her responsibility of the secret "distribution of literature" done several "times a month", in such a way that she is "dressed as a nun or as a peddler of laces or small linen articles, as a rich merchant's wife or a religious pilgrim" riding or walking about "with a sack on her back, or a valise in her hand" everywhere, "in the train, in the steamers, in hotels and inns", behaving "simply and unobtrusively"(234). Resolutely committed and firmly determined to her cause, Nilovna takes every responsibility assigned to her seriously to the extent that the strong desire seizes "her to accomplish it promptly and well", and she is "unable to think of anything but the task before her" (243). Cuddon further emphasizes that Sartre in *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946), has "expressed the belief that man can emerge from his passive and indeterminate condition and, by an act of will, become engagé; whereupon he is committed (through engagement) to some action and part in social and political life" and through such "commitment man provides a reason and a structure for his existence and thus helps to integrate society (Cuddon, 317).

Nilovna would hear "the words" that have "once frightened her: the riots, socialism, politics, often "uttered more and more frequently among the simple folk", "though accompanied by derision" notwithstanding their ridicule, it is "impossible to conceal an eagerness to understand, mingled with fear and hope, with hatred of the masters and threats against them" (266). The revolutionary agitation has its impact disturbing "the settled, dark life of the people in slow but wide circles and dormant thoughts awake, and men are "shaken from their usual forced calm attitude toward daily events" (266). Mother seems to be at the zenith of her existentialist quest, looking to the things and all the new development "more clearly than others", because who else can better know the "dismal, dead face of existence" and it is mother who resists the deterministic imposition of life and stands against all such odds with the power of her will (266-7).

Gorky recounts mother's audacious stand, her conscious volition, her commitment to the cause of subversion, and her unswerving attentiveness to the daring responsibilities of the revolution. In the novel mother would feel offended when she would be asked by the comrades, due to her old age, whether she would be able to accomplish the adventuresome tasks of the revolution. "When have I ever been afraid? I was fearless even the first time", she would answer whenever somebody inquired. Each time she was asked whether she was afraid, whether the thing was convenient for her, whether she could do this or that she detected an appeal to her which placed her apart from the comrades, who seemed to behave differently toward her than toward one another. Moreover, when fuller days came, although at first disquieted by the commotion, by the rapidity of events, she soon grew accustomed to the bustle and responded, as it were, to the jolts she received from her impressions. She became filled with a zealous greed for work (272).

Floating between her deterministic past and the present volition, mother listens to the dumb thoughts growing in her heart and memory bringing "before her a long series of events through which she had lived in the last years" (274). "Fatigue" dizzies "her brain; but her soul" is "strangely calm, and everything" illuminating from within her by a soft, kind light quietly and evenly filling "her breast" and she being acquainted with this calm" which has come "to her after great agitation", although disturbing her, but broadening and strengthening her soul, giving her power of thought (368). In such meditative moods, there would appear and disappear "the faces of her son, Andrey, Nikolay, Sasha" and she would take "delight in them" and they would pass by "without arousing thought, and only lightly and sadly touching her heart" (368).

Conclusion

Women's wretched conditions in pre-revolution Russia had gone to the extent that they were considered as commodities rather than human beings, were often treated like slaves, and were being left to face the worst of their fates. Russian fiction is the realistic depiction of the socio-cultural and political settings of Russian society. Maxim Gorky's *Mother* reflects the aforementioned tragic plights of the Russian women. This study has attempted to explore the development of Nilovna, the female protagonist of *Mother* in light of Jean Paul Sartre's notion of existentialism, investigating how the novel's female protagonist finds her way out of passivity and deterministic maze, experiencing the existentialist quest for discovering the true meaning of her existence. She has found the purpose of her existence by using her will to work for the revolution, playing a most significant role in the revolutionary movement. Using the broad theorisation of Sartre, the study has attempted to explore how a miserable woman in her existentialist journey traverses from the mundane deterministic domesticity to the purposeful revolution as an active political worker committed to the cause of revolution. The study has attempted to foreground how Gorky's protagonist, Nilovna, finds a purpose in her apparently meaningless and passive life by helping her son who becomes a socialist after his father's death. Depicting the plights of women in the 19th century Russia, the study has found that *Mother* has highlighted images of the prosaic, mundane and cruel living conditions of the Russian women through the protagonist, Pelageya Nilovna, whose miserable life as a wife of a drunkard has become a burden.

The study argued that initially Nilovna endures extreme suffering and humiliation as the wife of a cruel drunkard, which defines a deterministic existence for her. However, with her husband's death and her son's engagement with revolutionaries, she undergoes a transformative existential awakening. Pavel's abandonment of his destructive habits further aids her journey. Inspired by Pavel and his comrades, Nilovna gradually restores emotionally, actively engaging in life by learning to read and participating in revolutionary activities. Her existentialist sojourn emphasizes individual agency in overcoming adverse circumstances without relying on external sources. From

a Sartrean perspective, her transition from deterministic domesticity to anti-deterministic revolution signifies an existential leap, empowering her to play an active role in politics. Nilovna's commitment is unwavering as she disguises herself to distribute socialist literature, demonstrating her dedication to the cause. Overall, the study highlights Nilovna's profound existential transformation amidst the tumultuous backdrop of Russian society, offering rich potential for further research into Gorky's works through various philosophical lenses.

Works Cited

Akhter, Javed. “Characterization of Women in Maxim Gorky’s Novel *Mother*: A Marxist Feminist Perspective”. Al-Burz Volume & Issue 08, December 2016.

Bennett, Virginia. “MAKSIM GOR’KIJ’S "MAT’: A Primer for Consciousness Raising.” *Russian Language Journal / Русский Язык*, vol. 41, no. 138/139, 1987, pp. 83–94, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43909480. Accessed 16 May 2022.

Bhardwaj, Neelam. “Maxim Gorky’s Mother through the Lens of Marxist-Feminism”. International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL), volume 4, Issue 7, July 2016, pp 33-36.

Brintlinger, Angela. “Born in the Crucible of War: Chapaev and His Socialist Realist Comrades.” *Chapaev and His Comrades: War and the Russian Literary Hero across the Twentieth Century*, Academic Studies Press, 2012, pp. 34–64, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1zxsk2m.4. Accessed 16 May 2022.

Bulgaith, MHM. “The Women as an Archetypal Figure of Challenge and Fortitude in Maxim Gorky’s Mother: A Critical Appraisal”. ISSN 2348 – 0319 International Journal of Innovative and Applied Research (2014), Volume 2, Issue (11): 74- 8.

Gorky, Maxim. *Mother*, Lahore: Readings, Elan Vital Private Ltd, 2018.

Leitch,Vincent B. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, New York: W.W.Norton & Company.

Michelman, Stephen. *Historical Dictionary of Existentialism,* Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008.

Mikolchak, Maria. “*The Mother*” in *World Novel* (ed) Michael D. Sollars, New York: e Inc., 2008.

Sartre, Jean Paul. *Existentialism is Humanism,* New Heaven:Yale University press 2007 Rasool, Syed Hanif, Jahangir Khan, and Fasih Ur Rahman. "Rukhsana Ahmad's" The Gatekeeper's Wife": An Existentialist Study of a Western Woman's Experience of the South Asian Mystique." *PUTAJ Humanities & Social Sciences* 26.1 (2019).

Yeldin, Tovah. *MAXIM GORKY: A Political Biography,* Westport: Praeger Publishers 1999.

@ 2023 by the author. Licensee University of Chitral, Journal of Linguistics & Literature, Pakistan. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).