
Existential Crisis in Shahid Akhtar's *Shehr-e-Zaat* (*City of the Self*)

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Abstract

Shahid Akhtar's *Shehr-e-Zaat* presents a powerful exploration of existential crisis rooted in the socio-political realities of contemporary India. Set against the backdrop of communal violence, unemployment, systemic discrimination, and the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the novel portrays existential suffering as a lived social condition rather than a purely philosophical abstraction. This paper examines *Shehr-e-Zaat* through the combined perspectives of existential philosophy and socio-political analysis. It argues that Akhtar depicts how structural violence, marginalization, and identity-based hostility fracture the individual self and generate profound alienation. The study focuses on Khurshid, an educated yet unemployed youth whose aspirations for dignity, belonging, and self-realization are systematically crushed by communal polarization and institutional exclusion.

The central metaphor of the "City of the Self" symbolically represents the gradual disintegration of Khurshid's inner world under relentless external pressures. Drawing upon existential thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, and situating the novel within the modernist tradition of Urdu fiction, the paper demonstrates that *Shehr-e-Zaat* extends the existential discourse of Urdu literature into the twenty-first century. The novel ultimately emerges as a significant existential critique of identity, alienation, and injustice in contemporary society.

Keywords: Existentialism, Alienation, Social Exclusion, Communal Violence, Urdu Fiction, Identity

About the Author

Shahid Akhtar is a prominent contemporary Urdu fiction writer known for his rigorous engagement with socially sensitive themes including alienation, marginalization, and identity-based hostility. His prose blends realism with philosophical depth, reflecting both social conditions and the frailties of human consciousness. His narrative approach positions him within the lineage of modernist Urdu fiction while addressing the distinctive anxieties of twenty-first-century India. Shahid Akhtar was born on 20 July 1966 in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India. His father was the late Ashraf Ali, and his mother the late Shameem Bano. Akhtar received his education in Kanpur and completed his M.A. in Urdu. He later joined the Sales Tax Department, where he has been professionally employed alongside his literary pursuits.

Shahid Akhtar began his literary career with the short story “*Takla Nawab (The Bald Nawab)*”, which deals with the theme of homosexuality. The story was published in 1990 in the Mumbai-based literary magazine *Sha'ir*.

Akhtar has written more than one hundred short stories and two novels, many of which have been widely published and appreciated in prestigious Urdu and Hindi literary journals. In Hindi, his stories have frequently appeared in *Hans* and *New Gyanodaya*. In Urdu, his works have been published in leading magazines such as *Sher-o-Hikmat*, *Aajkal*, *Istifsaar*, *Darbhang Times*, *Aalami Falak*, *Salis*, *Imroz*, *Mizgaan*, *Aiwan-e-Urdu*, *Aamad*, *Zehn-e-Jadeed*, and *Naya Waraq*. For over twenty-five years, his short stories have also been broadcast on radio, contributing to his wider literary reach. He has participated in numerous literary seminars, including those organized by the Sahitya Akademi.

Major Works

- *Barf Par Nange Paon* (2001) – Short Story Collection
- *Shehr Mein Samandar* (2005) – Novel
- *Monti* (2008) – Short Story Collection
- *Khwabgeene* (2017) – Short Story Collection
- *Barf Par Nange Paon* (2019) – Short Stories in Devanagari Script
- *Shehr-e-Zaat* (2022) – Novel
- *Raftagan Ki Sadayin* (2024) – Selected Stories (Ed. Mohammad Ghalib Nashtar)

Awards and Recognition

In recognition of his literary contributions, Shahid Akhtar has received several prestigious honors. He was awarded the Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy Award for his short story collections *Monti* and *Khwabgeene*. He also received a Lifetime Contribution Award from the Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad, Kolkata, jointly presented by the renowned poet Gulzar and the eminent classical singer Girja Devi.

Introduction

The narrative begins with the mob lynching of Afzal and extends to the struggles of Khurshid, an educated youth who aspires to become an IAS officer but, due to systemic barriers and political discrimination, remains unemployed and is compelled to survive by giving private tuitions. His lack of esteem within his own family deepens his sense of failure and alienation. Khurshid's love for a Hindu girl becomes an unforgivable act in a polarized society, leading to his tragic death at the hands of a mob.

More than a victim of social violence, Khurshid emerges as the existential core of the novel, embodying despair, futility, and the search for meaning in a hostile world. By weaving together political oppression and existential crisis, Akhtar transforms *Shehr-e-Zaat* into both a narrative of private tragedy and a profound existential critique of identity, alienation, and injustice in contemporary society.

Existentialism in Urdu Literature

Existentialism, as a philosophical approach, emphasizes the individual's confrontation with alienation, despair, and the absence of inherent meaning in life. While it emerged in Western philosophy through the writings of Søren Kierkegaard (*The Sickness Unto Death*), Martin Heidegger (*Being and Time*), Jean-Paul Sartre (*Being and Nothingness; Existentialism Is a Humanism*), and Albert Camus (*The Myth of Sisyphus*), its resonances are not confined to European thought alone.

In Urdu literature, particularly after the decline of the Progressive Writers' Movement, existentialist concerns began to surface with remarkable intensity. As Progressivism gradually gave way to Modernism (*Jadidiyat*) during the 1950s and 1960s, the focus of literary expression shifted from collective struggles and ideological commitment to the fragmented self, psychological interiority, and crises of individual subjectivity.

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi observes that modernist Urdu fiction distances itself from overt social realism and instead foregrounds the fractured self (*shikast-e-khudi*) grappling with uncertainty and the erosion of stable meanings (*Afsane Ki Himayat*

Mein). Similarly, Gopi Chand Narang highlights that modern Urdu narrative increasingly privileges inner experience, semantic ambiguity, and existential tension over linear realism (*Fiction: Sheriyat, Tashkeel-o-Tanqeed*).

Writers such as Intizar Hussain, Qurratulain Hyder, and Nayyar Masood infused Urdu fiction with pronounced existential sensibilities. What distinguishes existentialism in Urdu literature is its rootedness in lived socio-political realities—Partition, migration, communal violence, and systemic marginalization.

Within this tradition, Shahid Akhtar's *Shehr-e-Zaat* emerges as a contemporary articulation of existential crisis, extending the modernist legacy into the twenty-first century.

Novel *Shehr-e-Zaat* in Its Socio-Political Context

Shehr-e-Zaat is set against the backdrop of rising communal tensions, economic instability, and the aftershocks of the Covid-19 pandemic. The opening lynching incident situates the narrative within a political reality where minority identities are increasingly precarious. Akhtar's choice to begin and end with mob violence mirrors the cyclical nature of systemic oppression.

Thematic Analysis

Fragmentation of the Self

The central metaphor of the “City of the Self” captures the fragmentation of Khurshid's identity. His inner world steadily decays under unemployment, unfulfilled longing, and social prejudice.

Communal Violence and Fear

Communal violence forms the structural backbone of the novel. Afzal's lynching establishes fear as a pervasive presence. Khurshid's death parallels Afzal's, reinforcing the tragic logic of identity-based violence.

Society and Alienation

Khurshid experiences alienation within family, society, and the economy. This multilayered alienation aligns with existential and Marxist frameworks, revealing alienation as systemic rather than psychological.

Existential Dimensions

Absurdity

The absurd emerges from the disconnect between Khurshid's faith in merit and the irrational violence of society.

Nothingness

Repeated failures hollow out Khurshid's inner world, transforming the "City of the Self" into ruins.

Freedom vs. Determinism

The novel challenges existential freedom by exposing how structural forces reduce choice to illusion.

Despair

Despair is gradual and structurally produced, culminating in Khurshid's annihilation.

Character Study in Existential Perspective

Khurshid embodies alienated selfhood, while Afzal functions as a philosophical symbol of absurd death. Minor characters represent societal indifference and hostility.

Symbolism and Style

"Shehr-e-Zaat (City of the Self)" as Symbol

The city mirrors psychological collapse.

Realism with Existential Undertones

Violence enters quietly, intensifying dread.

Silence, Absence, and Minimalism

Silence reflects existential emptiness.

Symbolic Use of Death

Death is non-redemptive, reinforcing absurdity.

Conclusion

Shehr-e-Zaat stands as a powerful fusion of socio-political critique and existential inquiry. Shahid Akhtar extends the modernist existential tradition of Urdu fiction into the twenty-first century, exposing the fragility of identity, belonging, and meaning in contemporary India.

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