

**EXISTENTIAL NIHILISM REFLECTED IN CAROL SHIELDS'S
THE STONE DIARIES (1993):
AN EXISTENTIALIST CRITICISM**



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RESEARCH PAPER

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Abstract

*This study displays existential nihilism in *The Stone Diaries*. The study asks firstly what are the indicators of existential nihilism in the novel, secondly how existential nihilism reflected in the novel, and why Carol Shield necessarily present such issue in her novel. The object of this study is *The Stone Diaries* by Carol Shields. It uses Existentialist criticism. This study belongs to qualitative research. In this method there are two types of data source namely primary and secondary data source. The primary data source is the novel and the secondary data is other works or any information related to the study. Both data are collected through library research and analyzed by descriptive analysis. The result of the study is that: in the novel Carol Shields illustrates a search for identity and meaning of life in which the major character experiences different existential situation and the necessity of making moral choice.*

*Keywords: Existential Nihilism, *The Stone Diaries*, Existentialist Criticism*

A. Introduction

The Stone diaries implicitly present existential nihilism theme. Existentialism and nihilism is two different theories propose by two different existentialist proponents. Existentialism is a theory about the way human life Dagun, (1990: 6). the most dominant figure in Existentialism is Jane-Paul Sartre. Sartre's existentialism presents that human is thrown in this world without value

then they have to search that value by their own. While nihilist regards that there is no value in the world. As such judgment is caused by the feeling of despair (Kenney, 1964: 210). Nietzsche suggests that the cause of nihilism is pessimism and faith (1968: 13). He proposes two types of nihilism namely active nihilism and passive nihilism (1968: 17). This concept is similar with what Albert Camus proposed about the “*absurd*”. Because the world is absurd, human can choose three paths that are: “*living in the constant dream fantasy, suicide and living without hope.*” (J.J Boies, 1961: 310) Meanwhile existential nihilism is the feeling of emptiness because a judgment that the world is meaningless. On the other hand, Carr (in Slocombe, thesis, 2003: 10) suggests five kinds of nihilism: (1) Epistemological nihilism (2) *Alethiological nihilism* (3) *Metaphysical* or *Ontological nihilism* (4) *Ethical* or *Moral nihilism*, and the last and the most common form of nihilism is *existential nihilism*.

If someone already makes a judgment that the world is meaningless, it can be assured that he will experience existential nihilism. According to Carr (in Slocombe, dissertation, 2003: 13) Existential nihilism is “the feeling of emptiness and pointlessness that follows from the judgment, ‘Life has no meaning’”. While Pratt says that the admission that life is meaningless will lead to the feeling of emptiness, which every action, suffering and feeling seems senseless.

Existential nihilism is a state where someone feels that his life is purposeless. It means that he does no longer know what he wants. Consequently he

then experience emptiness, that all he has done is meaningless. In order to make life meaningful, people have to make an obvious goal. The goal itself then they use as a guide to get a meaningful life. However, many people in this modern era have experienced emptiness or existential nihilism in their life. As stated by Nietzsche about two possibilities of nihilism, people who experience existential nihilism is they are who feel desperate; the people who stuck in their routine for instance, they do not have energy to make change to their own life. They just receive what life give to them which for Nietzsche (1968: 18) it associated with passive nihilism, “a sign of weakness”. Or in other case, people who are searching for a luxurious life, that all they have done is just for seeking pleasure. They actually have lost their real goal, let say these people work very hard to get money and they do not want to stop until they reach the top of the prosperity. They even ignore their family, relatives, social life or their health in their attempt to achieve it. They can get anything they want with their money, that is his goal, but after they got all they want, they will experience void inside them.

A story is usually written based on the phenomena which happened in society. Carol Shields one of the authors who present phenomena in society in her works. *The Stone Diaries* novel displays existential theme. Through this novel Carol Shield illustrate about an ordinary woman who search for identity and experience different existential situation during her life.

The Stone Diaries is a novel with many achievements. Therefore it is not surprising that some people have been attracted to conduct research toward this

artistic work. The first researcher who studied this book is Sara Megan Evans (1996) from McMaster University who entitled her research *Toward A Postmodern Multiculturalism?: Issues of Identity in Carol Shields's The Stone Diaries*. Through her research (Evans, thesis, 1996: iv) she found that “as postmodernism encourages a healthy cultural and ethnic exchange at the national level, it ironically obscures cultural and ethnic roots at the individual level and exposes the individual to the threat of isolation and meaninglessness”.

The second researcher is Maria Jesus Hernaes Lerena from La Rioja University. The title of her essay is *Narratives Genre and the Administration of Consciousness: the Case of Daisy Goodwill's Rebellion*. Her essay is conducted to analyze the implication of The Stone Diaries' protagonist stance with a view to pinning down some of the ideological grounds of the novel and of the short story in their approach to question of identity (Lerena, journal of English studies, vol.5-6, 2005-2008: 155).

The third researcher comes from University of Saskatchewan named Martin Edward Winquist (2009) with the research title *Creating Absence for Acknowledge Presence: Rational Subjectivity and Postmodernism in Carol Shield's The Stone Diaries*. His research is conducted to investigate the relationship between postmodernist discourse and feminist discourse.

The fourth research is *Graven Lives of Hagar and Daisy: Image of Feminine Depression in Lauren's The Stone Angle and Shield's The Stone Diaries* (1998) conducted by Carol Megan Davis from McMaster university. In

her thesis (1998: v) she concluded that Daisy's life stories illustrate a normal situation to women in the patriarchal society and depression is the result of women's attempt to survive in the wilderness society (for women).

Most of the thesis above criticizes *The Stone Diaries* from the feminist and postmodernist perspective; however I am interested in criticizing the novel using existentialist criticism and concern with existential nihilism reflected in Daisy Goodwill.

B. Research Method

This study belongs to qualitative research. In this method there are two types of data source namely primary and secondary data source. The primary data source is the novel and the secondary data is other works or any information related to the study. Both data are collected through library research and analyzed by descriptive analysis.

The writer use not taking technique to collecting the data and the steps are: reading and comprehending both primary and secondary data for several times, classifying the data into some groups based on its theoretical category, selecting particular parts considered important and relevant for analysis and drawing conclusion and formulate its pedagogical suggestion

In analyzing the data, the writer applies a descriptive approach. The writer analyzes the data based on Existentialist criticism. Focus will be paid on the meaning of existential nihilism in *The Stone Diaries* novel.

C. Research Finding and Discussion

The writer finds some research finding in analyzing *The Stone Diaries* novel. Each finding has some cases to be discussed.

1. Finding

After analyzing *The Stone Diaries*, The writer gets some findings that the major character of the novel experience two different existential situations.

a. Existentialist Issues in Daisy Stone Goodwill's Life

There are some issues of existentialism which can be found in the novel. The writer takes three point of Sartre's issues in Existentialism.

1) Existence and Essence of Daisy Stone Goodwill

Sartre in his *Existentialism and Humanism* gives an analogy of a craftsman produces paper cut and God creates human to explain the notion of existence and essence. Here he remarks that before a craftsman create a paper cut he already has a conception in mind. This conception includes its purpose, function, definition, and its form. Afterward he makes the paper cut to be existed in the form of real object. This real object is what he meant by existence and its conception is the essence.

Daisy's existence is already present or she is bodily existed since she is born. She is a child who is not expected by her parents. Her birth surprises many people especially her father. Her mother died after giving birth to her. Daisy believes that her essence can be found trough every action she does. It begins from the day she decides to marry Harold

Hoad, then nine years after, when she decides to travel to Canada and finally she chooses to marry Barker Flett. Every decision she takes seems unacceptable for other people especially her marriage with acute drinker man and the second man who is more appropriate to be her father. Yet it is her decision to choose such choices. And such decisions make it her essence. She writes in her diary that “*the acts of her life form[s] a sequence of definitions, that’s what she tells herself*” (148).

2) Freedom and Responsibility

Sartre states in *Existentialism and Humanism* that “*Human is condemned to be free*”. It means that because God did not exist as a consequence human have to make a decision on his own so they are free to do what they want. However, this freedom is not unlimited. Human have a responsibility over their decision.

Although it seems that Daisy does not realize that she has a freedom to choose, it can be seen that actually Daisy use her freedom. It is a controversial decision when she decides to marry to old Barker Flett. She knows precisely what other people might say about her marriage. Yet she does not care about other people’s opinion. It was her freedom to choose what is better to her life and other people cannot influence her in making a decision. It is like remarks by Sartre that other people may give advice before one takes a decision but at last he remains alone to decide. It also what he means by the feeling of *abandonment*. That is

what happens to Daisy. “*The odd thing about the pictures that fly into Daisy Goodwill’s head is that she is always alone. There are voices that reach her from distance; there are shadow and suggestions – but still she is alone.*” (357)

Besides the feeling of abandonment, one of the human characteristics is the feeling of *anguish*. Sartre states that human responsibility is not only for him-self but for others, because of that human will feel anguish. It happens in Daisy when she decides to leave her parents and go to Canada. Here she has to choose between leaving her parents or rooted in her parents’ house. It is not easy for her to leave her family. Here she feels *anguish* because if she approves Fraidy’s suggestion she is afraid to hurt her parents, but if she does not leave she cannot change her life. Finally she decides to go although it will make her parents sad.

3) Bad Faith

Bad faith is associated with self deceit. Sartre explains that if in usual falsehood there are two persons who can be called as a deceiver and person who is deceived. However in bad faith the deceiver and the person who is deceived are the same person. In other word bad faith is a self negation.

Sartre claims that every human must experience bad faith before they find their authenticity. In *The Stone Diary* Daisy’s bad faith can be

seen when she decides to go on trip to Canada. Before she goes there as the final place of her trip she visits Niagara Falls. In there she meets a man standing very close beside her. Seeing this man Daisy wants to make a relation with him but what she does is only passing by. She refuses her own desire to give her live to that man. Actually she believes that if she let her desire happen, she will be happy. But the fact is she denies her desire and hiding it from herself.

The other case of Bad faith can be seen when Barker and Daisy decides to marry. The reason of Barker decision to marry Daisy is because he is afraid of public norm. The passage below describes Barker's fear of public morality:

“Having read his Bertrand Russell, Barker Flett has long since cast off a belief in conventional morality, but, as a senior civil servant in His Majesty's government (Executive Director of Agriculture research), he is compelled to observe a certain level of propriety. A young woman under his roof? How would this look?”

A niece, he might explain, but Daisy is not really his niece. His ward? No, his guardianship has never been formalized. What is he to do? How will he explain her presence.” (149)

This condition, of course affects Daisy in making decision. Maybe it is true that the feeling of affection arises between them since they live together for a long time. But with accepting Barker as her husband is not what she really wants. If it is what she wants, she will not think about

men she met during her journey. Actually Daisy's reason to marry Barker flett is not mentioned in the novel. However from the passage it can be concluded that her marriage is not what they want rather the public norm mentioned above take control of them. It can be said that Daisy takes a safe path by marrying Barker.

b. Existential Nihilism of Daisy Stone Goodwill

Daisy chooses to live in passive nihilism or Camus suggests living without hope. She lives in this world without hope. She fails to find meaning of her life. She does not make a purpose for her life but rather she only wait until something happen to her. Actually Daisy has a potency to commit suicide. Daisy accepts this meaningless world and she learn to pass through it. In other words Daisy is in the state of despair. His world is full of bitterness and she accepts it without complain.

Here are already known that Daisy perceives that her world is lost of value and as the consequence she experiences the feeling of emptiness. All she does is meaningless. The passage below shows how she admits that her life is in emptiness.

“The long days of isolation, of silence, the torment of boredom – all these press down on me, on young Daisy Goodwill and emptied her out. Her autobiography, if such a thing were imaginable, would be, if such a thing were ever to be written, an assemblage of dark voids and unbridgeable gap.” (75-6)

The Stone Diary is an autobiography written by Daisy. Her statement that her autobiography will be an assemblage of dark void is true. She does not have purpose in life; all she can do is waiting for a fortune. She is always alone and rarely feels happy. It is told that she has friends and families, but still loneliness is in her heart. She feels that her families do not care about her and she "*belongs to no one*".

2. Discussion

A story is usually written based on the phenomena which happened in society. In an interview Carol Shields says that "I supposed a contemporary novel isn't supposed to rely too heavily on coincidence and synchronicity, but *The Stone Diaries* is filled with coincidences. So are most people's lives. I like to collect stories of other people's coincidences because I suspect that that's how the universe really works." Through this novel she wants to give an illustration about women's life. Most of women do not know what they want in their lives. They live their life in the passive manner. They accept what is to be their fate although they do not want it. What Sartre says is true that every individual must experience *bad faith*. As such condition will result women lack of identity.

Existential nihilism phenomenon is already appears in society. The notion that everything which human done has no value seems happen to Daisy Stone Goodwill. She accepts everything happened to her without protest. Most of her

decision leads her to an unhappy life. And seeing her own condition she does not seem to have a willingness to alter her life to be better or at least to be happier. Her day to day life passes without a meaning.

“There is something here that speaks of our essential helplessness and how the greater substance of our lives is bound up with waste and opacity. Even the sentence parts seize on the tongue, so that to say “Twelve years passed” is to deny the fact of biographical logic. How can so much time hold so little, how can it be taken from us? Months, weeks, days, hours, misplaced and the most precious time of life, too, when our bodies are at the greatest strength, and open, as they never will be again, to the onslaught of sensation.” (27-8)

The passage above gives a sign of Daisy's agreement that the world is meaningless. People live for a long time pass through the days but they never realize their actual purpose of what they do and why they even exist. Such a condition happens to Daisy, that she passes through her life without knowing what the purpose of her life.

D. Conclusion

Based on the philosophical analysis, this study shows that in this novel Carol Shields illustrates an existential situation in which the major character is trying to establish meaning of life but she does not find any divine guidance how to do it so she is always in the search for meaning of life by decision and choices.

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