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Poetics of Dissonance and Nihilism: Negotiating Existential Crisis in Nini Lungalang's *The Morning Years*

Nawal Kishor Lodhi
Research Scholar,
Department of English and Modern European and Other Foreign Languages,
School of Languages,
Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur,
Uttar Pradesh, India.
nawal2523@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0443-2024
Nitin Saxena
Assistant Professor,
Axis Institute of Technology and Management,
Kanpur, India.
https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n5.8

Abstract:
The research work examines dissonance and nihilism, arguing that the select poetry collection evokes a profound sense of existential crisis through a sustained interplay of mortality, emotional split, alienation, isolation, violence, ecological precarity, and meaninglessness of life. It analyses artificial urban life and offers a nuanced yet unembellished representation of Nagaland's emotional experiences. Drawing upon the existentialist perspectives given by Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, the study employs textual analysis methods to explore the relationship between existentialist consciousness and lived experiences portrayed in poetic form. The study foregrounds that dissonance not only acts as a mere thematic representation of psychological conflict but also serves as a formal poetic strategy through which fragmentation, juxtapositions, silence, and the tension between remembered experience and present reality are articulated. The study further establishes that nihilistic impulses are shaped by confrontations with mortality, violence, ecological uncertainty, and the perceived instability of meaning.

Keywords: Nini Lungalang, Existentialism, Dissonance, Nihilism, Meaninglessness, Alienation.

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1. Introduction

The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel coined the term "existentialism" in the 1940s to describe the views of Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre defined existentialism through its core principle, "existence precedes essence". Sartre's existentialism can be understood through his view that the fundamental impetus for actions arises from the nature of consciousness and its inherent longing for being. Existential crisis refers to the profound psychological conflict too, wherein an individual struggles with the possibility that life has no coherent purpose, values, meaningfulness of existence. Existentialist philosophers argue that freedom reveals essential dimensions of the world and its inhabitants (Deranty).

Authors employed structural and emotional contradictions in literature to reflect the complexities of human existence, even before the formal introduction of cognitive dissonance in psychology by Leon Festinger in 1957. Dissonance refers to a state of psychological discomfort when someone possesses two or more contradictory cognitions (Festinger 1-3). Dissonance, as a literary device, is used to disrupt established harmony, interrupt flow or continuity, and create an unsettling mismatch in a story's logic. When the writer interrupts the flow, the interruption immediately transforms the reader's psychological and emotional experience. Hence, it is a powerful tool as it can force readers out of their passive comfort (Shklovsky 3–24).

As a philosophical concept, nihilism emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries through the works of a German philosopher, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and a prominent Russian literary figure, Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev. It was further popularised through the views of Friedrich Nietzsche, who understood it as a widespread cultural phenomenon in which people abandon their traditional values and ideals under the influence of secularisation (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 343).

Nini Lungalang, born in Nagaland, is a celebrated poet, teacher, and musician. She was born in Kohima, Nagaland, in 1948; the time period falls amid the turbulent historical interlude between India's Independence and the Naga nationalist movement (Assumi). Dr. Shürhozelie Liezietsu, former Chief Minister of Nagaland, remarks that Nini occupies a significant place among pioneering Nagas who attained a high level of proficiency in English literature ("'The Morning Years' by Late Nini Lungalang Re-released").

Nini Lungalang's poetry is written in simple language and free verse style. The use of a conversational tone in writing her poems reflects deeper philosophical and emotional meanings while articulating profound ideas. Nini is a celebrated poet who compellingly explores the conflict between inner expressions and the irreversible progression of time. She is classified as a twentieth-century metaphysical poet about events of personal life with spiritual and abstract reasoning.

2. Literature Review

"How often it is that the angry man rages denial of
what his inner self is telling him."

— Frank Herbert, *Dune*

As per existentialism, individuals make their existence more meaningful through the actions and choices that define them. Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre were two prominent voices associated with existentialism in the 20th century. These existentialists acknowledge the lack of cosmic meaning but also emphasise the necessity of constructing meaning through individual experiences (Shirvani). Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism (1946)* seeks to dispel the view that existentialism is characterised by pessimism, immorality, and nihilistic tendencies; rather, Sartre foregrounds the core idea of existentialism according to

which existence precedes essence. This claim reverses the traditional view that emphasises essence over existence (Verma). According to Sartre, modern poetry represents a misguided employment of language rather than an effective use of linguistic expression; however, Francis Ponge regards poetry as the most effective means of articulating the world and can compel human freedom to confront ethical responsibilities (Deranty). In contrast to Jean-Paul Sartre's profound emphasis on radical freedom and self-definition, Alber Camus underscores the futility of pointlessness of searching for an ultimate essence or transcendent explanation for human existence. Through his *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus evaluates death as an escape from problem rather than confronting it; religion retreats into illusion leading to meaninglessness; and revolt as confronting the absurdity of existence without surrendering to it. Ultimately, Camus hails the revolt over death and religion as the revolt transcends despair and becomes a constructive ethical stance that demands courage, embraces engagement, and affirms life without requiring transcendent justification. In this manner, revolt becomes significant to resist injustice and to find meaning and affirmation in life (Verma).

Literary discourses present dissonance as a lethal poison that is harmful to mind and body, and as a vital cure too, as it creates awakening which prevents us from feeling numb and bored. For example, Georges Rodenbach, propounding the notion that mental conflict erodes a person's health and sense of inner peace, remarks, *"Dissonance is as fatal in ailments of the mind as it is in those of the body"* (366); however, on the other hand, Richard Powers presents the positive aspect of the same as it champions vitality over apathy and motivates us to face the objective reality (ch. 2).

Derived from the Latin term *nihil* (meaning nothing), nihilism asserts that life has no intrinsic value or inherent meaning. It rejects objective morals, truth, and traditional structures. In other words, nihilism refers to the process of becoming aware that prolonged efforts and energy, invested in pursuit of a goal, have amounted to nothing. Friedrich Nietzsche divided nihilism

into active nihilism and passive nihilism, wherein the former is a powerful force that dismantles traditional values in order to enable the emergence of new ones, and the latter is characterised by existential apathy arising from the belief that life and its pursuits are ultimately meaningless (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* 17). Depending on the varied aspects of human experiences, it can be of different types: existential, moral, political, cosmic, and epistemological. Among all these types, it is existential nihilism that propounds the view that life has no objective meaning. On the other hand, moral nihilism asserts that there is nothing right or wrong in objective reality, and that these are mere human creations.

Nini Lungalang's poetry collection, *The Morning Years* (2020), consists of 45 poems reflecting on the complexities of life, persistence of the past, ageing, internal struggles of self, philosophical ideas about life, alienation, harsh realities of modern life, grief, landscapes as living agents of memory in Nagaland. Moreover, the selected poetry collection also engages with questions of individual identity, personal grief, and complex sociopolitical realities situated within the literary and sociopolitical contexts of the Northeast Indian region. Nini Lungalang resists constructing her Naga identity as romanticised or mythologised, unlike Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai and other contemporary writers from the region. She also challenges the stereotype according to which indigenous literature is nothing more than an emotional testimony or documentary representation of the region (Assumi).

3. Methodology

This qualitative research employs a narrative review approach, which is based on the critical analysis of extensive literature available, encompassing works on existentialism, dissonance, nihilism, and meaninglessness. Using the principles of existentialism and nihilism, it employs textual analysis methods to analyse and interpret the relevant literature, both primary source and secondary sources. For the same purpose, the current research is delimited to the critical

analysis of select poetic works from Nini Lungalang's poetry collection *The Morning Years* dealing with the relevant narratives.

4. Textual Analysis and Relevant Discussion

In her poem "*Going Home"*, Nini Lungalang portrays dissonance by exploring the friction between life in modern cities and a sense of belonging to the ancestral land or homeland. It reflects on existential alienation in urban spaces by propounding the notion that people experience estrangement even when they are surrounded by other people or, in other words, physical proximity and human interconnectedness are not able to create a sense of belonging. She remarks, *"A man is a stranger among his own"*. She also criticises the commodification of existence and the commercialisation of peace by saying that for all types of human needs ranging from peace to means of livelihood, a person has to spend some amount which further establishes the idea that human worth is assessed through an economic lens, as she remarks, *"For a small measure of peace, he must / Reach for his wallet, and buy it."* Using positive and negative adjectives like 'remote', 'harsh', 'grim', 'real', 'holy', and 'unchanging' for describing mountains posits the view that terrain in the Northeast Indian region is unpleasant and far distant in location, but life is peaceful, free from stress, full of grace; people are honest; and land is sacred unlike in urban spaces. Nostalgia for homeland can also be found in her poetic works wherein mountains act as healing agents, rendering a cure for existential alienation, isolation between walls, chaotic life, and the frantic pace of urban spaces, as she remarks, *"So, I'm going back home, I'm terrified here, / I'm going to the sanctuary of my mountains"* (96).

Nini's other poem, titled *Mirror*, also establishes a connection to dissonance as it examines the paradox between a daughter's attempt to develop her own identity and the enduring behavioural patterns of maternal inheritance. The mother experiences a sense of irony when

her daughter wants to resemble her in characteristics, specifically when the mother does not want her to do so (26–27).

Invoking the mortality of human life, Nini reflects on psychological suffering too, which ultimately changes her perception of reality. The use of visual metaphors (i.e. tear, prism) shows deep emotional pain and distortion of reality, which are also evident in her verses. Herein, the prism refers to the emotional split and tears that alter how things look in reality. She writes:

"I return to the dust of which I am formed

...

Your face strange now, shattered, refracted

In the prism of my tears" (97)

Kohima, the birthplace of Nini Lungalang, acts as a psychologically fractured landscape in her poetry. In her other poem *Impressions: Winter – Kohima,* Nini presents Kohima not merely as a geopolitical landscape but as intimate, lived experiences wherein mundane actions merge with existential introspection and the resigned acceptance of marginalised existence. The poem progresses from bleakness, deprivation, and emotional anguish toward a renewed sense of hope expressed through the verse, *"Hope rises with the light."* The use of terms like 'electric', 'fire', 'gas flame', and 'knives' resonates with the meaninglessness of emotions in modern life, which is contrasted against the warmth of loved ones' surroundings reflected in the metaphor of grandmother's kitchen. Emotional coldness can also be linked to words like 'frozen', 'grey hour', and 'hateful things.' The usage also suggests that human existence is fragile and transient, as it is constantly threatened by its surroundings. The barren surroundings or deserted landscapes act as symbols that amplify the experience of the poet's sense of isolation, as she remarks, *"Even the cars have abandoned our street"* (68-69).

The poem, *Dirge: (Kohima, 20th March'89…. 2 Killed, 80 Maimed),* underscores the anguish inflicted by violence and death. On 20 March 1989, two students, Kekuojalie Sachü (19) and Vikhozo Yhoshü (14), were killed in a firing by state police and several others were injured while participating in a peaceful protest against the state government's decision on the introduction of "IPS Cadres" and extension of "Disturbed Area Belt" along the then India-Myanmar border ("Remembering Kekuojalie"; Lungalang 48-49).

Grounded in behaviour, ageing becomes part of an ongoing process through which the human body changes in relation to its emerging bio-identities and life forms (Marshall & Katz). Nini's other poem, *Old Tribal Woman Waiting to Die in the City Hospital,* presents a compelling critique of the contrast between medicalised treatment of death in a contemporary urban space and the traditional understanding of death. The poem depicts an old tribal woman in a hospital room who is surrounded by medical equipment, where she feels deeply alienated. The poem also captures an old tribal woman's longing to return to her homeland, portrayed in the poem through the sensory image of fresh air. It contrasts loneliness with a sense of community as the old lady faces death when surrounded by medical professionals, equipment and machinery, and not in the surroundings of her own family members, relatives, and other tribal community members. In this manner, the poem meticulously highlights the emotional and cultural trauma which occurs when aboriginal people are uprooted from their indigenous culture and are forced to adapt to modern structures, specifically at the end of their lives, which, in turn, symbolises the meaninglessness of life and human relationships. Rather than reinforcing heroic or glorified death, Nini presents the inevitability of death; the same concept is also used in her other poem, titled *"Death."* She specifically remarks,

"Now there are five of us, we were six

By tonight I think there will be four,

…

Open the windows once again

And let me breathe my pagan air." (89-91).

In existentialism, enjoying freedom necessitates immense suffering and pain (Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* 28-29; Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 439-53). Exploring themes of captivity and innate desire for freedom, Nini's poem titled 'Bird' reiterates the simple fact that true existence derives its authenticity, even beyond modern structures imposed externally, as presented in the poem through the 'golden cage'. 'Wines' and 'seeds of pearls' act as temptations offered to the bird, which are finally rejected by the bird in order to remain true to its inherent nature (34–35). In Northeast Indian ecopoetry, the metaphor of 'bird' serves as a fragile witness to ecological degradation of the region, human suffering, and untamed peace (Bhattacharyya).

Pulie Badge, a popular hiking destination in Pulie Badze Wildlife Sanctuary, is a mountain peak in Kohima District of Nagaland. The poet, through her poem, titled '*On Puliebadze',* represents the human encroachment of the mountains as unwanted and warns humans not to disrupt the natural rhythm. The poem parallels marginalisation with ecological degradation, highlighting the concept of ecological precarity that human encroachment will ultimately result in environmental degradation, which will further threaten the survival of other living organisms. She writes:

"Swiftly remove yourself from holy ground, for shame!

Let not even footprint betray your defiling presence." (81).

5. Conclusion

Existentialist theorists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus portray the world as lacking coherent purpose, values, and meaningful existence. The analysis demonstrates that nihilistic tendencies arise mainly from existential uncertainty rather than an open rejection of objective

meaning. It also demonstrates poetry's ability to engage deeply with existential crisis, to articulate its conflicting dimensions, and to discover the tentative possibility of hope even in silence. Urban spaces frequently appear as spaces of emotional emptiness, wherein physical closeness and human surroundings are not able to develop a sense of belonging; moreover, human worth is measured in terms of economic productivity. By contrast, remembered homeland and familial relations offer a sense of temporary happiness, but these sources of comfort and happiness are not easily attainable in the contemporary world. The contrast between memories of being altogether and the present sense of alienation becomes the most compelling manifestations of dissonance in the select poetry collection.

The dissonance between urban spaces and the homeland produces a sense of self suspended between conflicting spaces, cultural identities, and emotional attachments. Invoking death, transience, and emotional split through her collection, Nini Lungalang foregrounds the impermanent nature of human existence and the fragility of human relationships. Her poems repeatedly juxtapose natural elements with death, poverty, violence, and loneliness, which also emerges as the powerful structural embodiment of dissonance in this poetry collection. The diminished warmth of human relations, uprootedness, unfamiliar modern structure, alienation, isolation, environmental degradation, and commodification of peace altogether reinforce the idea that human existence is fragile and uncertain. In her poetry, memory helps evoke a sense of intimacy and warmth absent from the contemporary world. She regards cultural identity as an organic and universal dimension of social existence, not as a construct deliberately shaped to meet literary-market expectations. The research analysis also posits that Nini Lungalang presents distinct poetics of dissonance and existential crisis. Ultimately, Nini Lungalang transforms existential uncertainty into a sustained poetic expression of individual and collective experiences of crisis.

Therefore, the analysis makes it apparent that Nini Lungalang's poetics yields a sustained engagement between nihilistic consciousness and the lingering potential for meaning. Moreover, the dissonance serves as a literary device through which this engagement takes place.

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