

Emotional Exile and the Female Self: Existential Feminism in M.

T. Vasudevan Nair's Mist

Rekha. V. G

Assistant Professor of English

Central Polytechnic College

Thiruvananthapuram, Karala, India

rekhavngenglish@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the concept of emotional exile and female subjectivity through the lens of existential feminism in *Mist* by M. T. Vasudevan Nair. The study explores how the narrative portrays women's inner loneliness as an existential condition shaped by alienation, emotional isolation and the search for identity within patriarchal structures. Drawing on existential feminist thought, the paper argues that the female characters experience a profound sense of displacement, becoming existentialist exiles in their own worlds where freedom, selfhood and authentic existence remain elusive. Their lives are marked by waiting, longing and unresolved emotional desires that deepen their sense of isolation and intensify internal conflicts. The novel reveals how patriarchal confinements blur the boundaries between imagination and reality, trapping women in a whirl of emotional uncertainty and self-negation. Through its nuanced representation of female consciousness, *Mist* exposes the tension between individual aspirations and social expectations, highlighting the struggles for autonomy and self-definition. Ultimately the paper contends that emotional exile functions as both a psychological and existential state, illuminating the complex ways in which women negotiate identity, freedom and subjectivity in a world structured by gendered limitations.

Keywords: Existentialism, Alienation, Identity, Subjectivity, Emotional Exile

Introduction

The existential loneliness of women in patriarchal societies emerge from the complex interplay of alienation, identity, subjectivity and emotional isolation. Within male dominated social structures women often find themselves confined by cultural expectations and prescribed gender roles that limit their autonomy and self-expression. Existentialist thought foregrounds the individual's struggle to create meaning and lead an authentic life despite the inherent absurdity and incomprehensibility of existence. For women however this struggle is intensified by social conditions that render them marginal within their own worlds. As a result they frequently experience a profound sense of estrangement - not only from society, but also from their own desires, aspirations and identities. Feminist existentialism highlights how women become existential exiles within the very social spaces they inhabit, negotiating the tension between personal freedom and societal constraints. We find the representation of such existential loneliness in Vimala, how she confronts alienation, her search for authentic selfhood and attempt to assert her subjectivity in a world structured by patriarchal norms.

Absurdist Dimensions of Human Existence

M T Vasudevan Nair's *Mist* occupies a unique place in Malayalam literature as his only novel centered on a female protagonist. Through Vimala, Nair presents a profound psychological exploration of alienation, uncertainty and the search for meaning. Unlike the socially grounded heroes of his other works, Vimala represents the modern individual, emotionally displaced and struggling to establish a coherent sense of self. The title *Mist* functions as an extended metaphor for modern existence. Mist obscures vision and blurs boundaries, symbolizing the uncertainty and confusion that characterise human life. Vimala's memories, emotional conflicts and fragmented relationships reflect the loneliness and disorientation of the modern condition. The recurring image of mist thus becomes a powerful symbol of existential ambiguity.

The novel also engages with key existential concerns. Vimala experiences isolation and a persistent awareness of the emptiness beneath social conventions. Her attempts to understand herself are frustrated by the absence of stable meanings and certainties. Through her psychological journey, Nair explores themes of freedom, identity and authenticity.

Furthermore, Vimala's alienation resonates with the principles of the Theatre of the Absurd. Communication often fails; relationships remain incomplete and human actions appear disconnected from clear purposes. Although *Mist* is not strictly an absurdist text, its focus on existential anxiety, estrangement and the incomprehensibility of experience aligns it with absurdist thought. Through the symbolic use of the mist and the psychological depth of Vimala's character, Nair offers a compelling portrayal of modern existence. The novel remains a significant work for its insightful exploration of identity, meaning and the uncertainties of the human condition.

Female Subjectivity and Selfhood

Vimala embodies existential detachment, solitude and inner balance. Unconcerned with relationships or social expectations, she remains emotionally detached from external events, treating solitude as a form of freedom. Though her life appears marked by boredom, Vimala does not despair. Her appreciation of silence reflects an acceptance of life's emptiness and a willingness to confront existence without illusion.

Vimala's waiting lacks any definite goal and serves mainly as a social appearance of purpose. It symbolises the human search for meaning despite the awareness of life's uncertainty and futility. By choosing solitude, Vimala preserves her independence and authenticity. Her acceptance of loneliness reflects the existential belief that individuals ultimately face existence alone, making her a symbol of freedom and alienation.

Emotional Isolation and Existential Quest for Authenticity

Vimala embodies a form of emotional exile rooted in existential alienation and feminine self-withdrawal. The narrative unfolds through her stream of consciousness, revealing a woman who deliberately chooses isolation over social engagement. Her reluctance to return home during school vacations stems not from physical separation alone, but from profound emotional estrangement. Home offers neither security nor belonging: an authoritarian father, a reckless brother, a self-absorbed sister, and a mother involved in an illicit affair create an atmosphere of inner emptiness beneath the facade of a modern family. Vimala's loneliness is therefore largely self-inflicted, reflecting an existential condition in which traditional sources of meaning - family, relationships and social conventions fail to provide fulfilment. Her preference for silence and solitude signifies a search for authenticity outside the expectations imposed upon women.

The setting of Nainital functions as a psychological landscape that mirrors Vimala's inner state. Beautiful, yet intimidating, the mountains and secluded surroundings symbolise both attraction and the burden of emotional withdrawal. Her prolonged waiting for Sudhir becomes a form of existential escapism through which she constructs a purpose that allows her to remain detached from society. However, her dismissive reaction to Sardarji, who may be interpreted as an older version of the imagined Sudhir, reveals the gap between idealised longing and lived reality. Similarly, her emotional indifference to her father's death and Buddhu's uncertain search for his own father underscore the novel's exploration of existential uncertainty. Both characters struggle to locate meaning, purpose and emotional connection in a world that appear indifferent and absurd.

The recurring motif of mist serves as a powerful symbol of existential ambiguity and the invisibility of women's suffering. By obscuring vision and dissolving clear boundaries, the mist reflects Vimala's confused inner world, marked by uncertainty, deferred desires and

unrealised aspirations. Waiting and longing become central structures of her existence, trapping her within cycles of expectation and disappointment. The novel presents a deeply pessimistic vision of human fulfilment, suggesting that happiness is fleeting and that individuals inevitably return to states of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. Vimala's perception of time further reinforces this despair; she finds comfort merely in the passing of days, imagining herself "floating like a fluff of cotton" in the relentless chariot of time. This image captures her sense of passivity and lack of agency, epitomising the existential predicament of an individual caught between the desire for meaning and the inevitability of uncertainty, where existence becomes an act of endurance rather than purposeful engagement.

Conclusion

Mist offers a profound exploration of existential isolation through the lens of female subjectivity, revealing how women's experiences of loneliness are shaped not only by individual consciousness, but also by gendered structures of existence. Vimala's condition exemplifies what may be termed an emotional exile, wherein she remains alienated within the very social world she inhabits. Drawing upon Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the woman as the 'other', the narrative demonstrates how female subjectivity is constituted through exclusion, dependence and restricted agency, resulting in a uniquely gendered form of existential alienation. Unlike the universal existential subject who is theoretically free to exercise choice and create meaning Vimala's freedom is constrained by patriarchal expectations that limit both her actions and imagination. Her interior monologues reveal a deep emotional barrenness and an acute awareness of absence, loneliness and incompleteness, exposing the silent psychological struggles that often remain hidden beneath ordinary domestic existence. The recurring image of mist becomes a central metaphor for this condition symbolising uncertainty, obscurity and the blurred contours of female desire and selfhood. Like the mist that envelops the landscape, Vimala's imagination remains clouded, she is unable - or

rather socially conditioned not to think beyond the boundaries imposed upon her. Consequently, she appears as a woman grappling in the dark, searching for meaning in a world that denies her the freedom to fully articulate her aspirations. The novel thus illustrates how existential anxiety becomes more pronounced in the case of woman, whose search for authenticity is complicated by structures of gendered oppression and emotional silencing. Through its nuanced portrayal of loneliness, waiting, longing and psychological displacement, *The Mist* reveals that female existence is marked by a double burden, the universal human struggle for meaning and the specifically feminine experience of being rendered peripheral within one's own world. In foregrounding this intersection of existentialism and feminism, the text ultimately presents loneliness not as a temporary emotional state but as a profound condition of being, making Vimala's journey a painful representation of existential isolation and female subjectivity.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Copyright: © 2026 by Rekha. V. G Author(s) retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

References

Nair, sM. T. Vasudevan, *Mist and Creature of Darkness*. Orient Blackswan, 1974

Carol Macomber. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Yale UP, 2007.

Sartre.J.P,1943[1956] *Being and Nothingness*, H.Barnes (trans) New York:Washington
Square Press

Chandran,Anila. “No One Came - Farcicality of Waiting in M. T. Vasudevan Nair’s *Mist*.” *The
Creative Launcher*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2017, pp. 191–94.

Cromwell, Neil. *The Absurd in Literature*. UK; Manchester University Press,2006.

Cuddon.J.A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*. New York; Penguin Group,1998