



Between Survival and Selfhood: The Artist's Dilemma in Hari Kunzru's *Blue Ruin*

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Abstract— The novel and its main character, Jay, initiate an intense exploration of how artistic choices remain consistent with survival when both economic uncertainty and creative commodities surround us. Through its main protagonist, Jay, the novel scrutinizes philosophical concepts of existence by following his journey from promising concept art to the below-average work he now accepts. Jay's artistic downfall and his desire to establish a new identity offer readers a method to study the exterior influences that control artistic life. The quarantine situation causes Jay to face his previous transgressions while exploring whether authentic existence remains possible in this capitalist system. Through textual analysis and Sartrean philosophy, this research investigates how the book displays artistic disillusionment, performance, and existential turmoil. This study investigates (1) the manner through which Kunzru employs artists' struggles for critiquing art commodification under neoliberal capitalism, (2) the role of pandemics as existential triggers, and (3) the ethical dilemmas of personal transformations during capitalist survival demands. This study presents an argument regarding the artist's freedom struggles and humanity's vulnerabilities while navigating dangers in modern-day society through the *Blue Ruin* depiction.



Keywords— *existentialism, pandemic, identity, ethics.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The battle between survival needs and personal identity is more than a personal crisis since it formed philosophical discussion and literary creation for many centuries. According to Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, both philosophers in existentialist thought, humans must face the burden of liberty since the world lacks permanent meaning while people receive imposed standards unrelated to their core being. The artist must navigate a difficult truth because their creative work shows their individuality and negotiates conventions that validate artistic work. The contemporary artistic struggle exists beyond artistic expression because it requires artists to fight against being lost in capitalist spectacle while fighting to maintain their identity. Writer Hari Kunzru examines this conundrum in *Blue Ruin*, demonstrating the thin line between creators retaining artistic ethics and the cultural consumption requirements of the systems. Kunzru focuses on exposing fictional identities

as unstable constructs through his fiction because his characters move between various racial, social, and political positions while remaining constant performers. Through *Blue Ruin*, Kunzru examines artistic creation while exploring three questions: Does artistic production involve being consumed, can artists establish independence from exploitation, or have these efforts always failed?

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: SCOPE & IMPLEMENTATION

a.)-The Existential Crisis of Selfhood and Survival: Through the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, human beings encounter their fundamental existential condition, which manifests both the weight of radical freedom and its liberatory aspects. His main belief about existentialism states that existence takes precedence over essence because people need to make choices to create their personal identities. From Sartrean existentialism emerges

the differing perspective on meaning because it is an active construction that bypasses both essentialist identities and divine-designed predetermined nature. Self-creation as the sole responsibility results in constant distress because each decision shapes personal identity without any external power that can bring comfort or salvation. People deceive themselves about the freedoms of existentialism through bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) when they believe roles and social expectations, along with economic requirements, confine them. Instead of facing the dual fear and freedom of self-creation, people relegate themselves to house-made identities that force specific ways of living. The waiter demonstrates bad faith through his excessive job performance, so precisely he loses his independence and turns into a role-based entity. The concept that starts in job roles applies to all survival strategies that unconsciously sap authenticity from people. The person who needs safety yet wishes for personal development stands between the decisions of surrender and independence and freedom.

Transformation into an object occurs through the application of the Look (*Le Regard*) when someone realizes others gaze at them. According to Sartre people define each other during social encounters because both internal choices and external judgments shape how they see themselves. The dual nature of freedom through self-definition encounters a paradox because the external gaze forces an identity that disrupts individual sense of self. The requirement of societal agreement for survival means this existential battle continues to exist between genuine self-expression and masquerades which people must don to access external power sources. The existence of these modern social tensions has elevated authentic existence to both an ethical necessity and an impractical unreachable goal. Authentic existence demands that people choose their own path by taking personal control away from external identities and making choices that match their genuine self. According to existentialism the search for complete authenticity remains unattainable because people constantly manage their existence within controlling structures which attempt to shape them. Every form of rebellion gets stripped away from its original meaning so that the fight over self-ownership becomes transformed into either a staged performance or an economic product. Freedom in modernity exists as a dual concept because it simultaneously grants complete independence yet limits individuals who need to survive. The existential crisis between personal identity and survival affects all parts of human life. Throughout artistic areas as well as politics and economics people have to continuously reevaluate their position relative to controlling factors which at once enable and limit their presence. Through Sartrean existentialism one can perform a philosophical analysis and gain critical

understanding of human existence and freedom while facing societal constraints.

b.)-Crisis and Creation: Sartrean Existentialism in a World of Ruin: The COVID-19 pandemic brought an outcome greater than healthcare challenges because it became a pivotal examination of human existence. Human freedom showed its breaks during the pandemic which required individuals to face the essential Sartrean conflict involving their sense of self and need for survival. Sartre's philosophy teaches that people get their essence after their existence exists because free choices make their identities. Survival during the pandemic required people to surrender to outside forces thus defying authentic autonomy. During this stage bad faith emerged as one of Sartre's most important concepts. The numerous uncertainties made people seek the relief of external authorities alongside roles and ideologies as a way to avoid their decisions. Online environments escalated this situation because they continuously exposed people to the dehumanizing feeling of being observed by others. The self-evolved into something that needed performance instead of natural existence because people attempted to reconcile their true being with external demands of steadfastness and constant output. The essential turmoil that leads artist Hari Kunzru to create *Blue Ruin* exists as a direct reflection of his main storyline. Throughout the narrative the main character struggles to survive confrontationally with societal demands yet the reader questions whether complete self-loyalty is possible in an environment that destroys personal identity. According to both Sartre and Kunzru, creative acts serve as the final demonstration of freedom whenever fundamental life changes occur.

III. RESEARCH GAP

The existential and ethical complications in artistic creation among consumers of neoliberal capitalism in Hari Kunzru's *Blue Ruin* have primarily escaped academic evaluation alongside his established work of analyzing identity and globalization along with technology. Studies on this subject have not investigated the detailed depiction of how economic and social factors affect artists' developing inner turmoil. The research addresses the missing analytical connection between artistic independence and public pressure to establish authentic artwork by employing Sartre's existentialist framework. The study strives to add value to academic discussions about the conjunction of art with ethics and social transformation.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

In *Blue Ruin* Hari Kunzru presents a fascinating tale about how artists survive existential struggles caused by neoliberal capitalism. The main character Jay represents the fundamental inharmony between maintaining artistic standards and following today's world economic norms. Through his existentialist approach Sartre explains Jay's development by studying his personal freedom and choices as well as his sense of responsibility. As Sartre explains human beings suffer from freedom because they must create their essence through personal conduct rather than cultural roles. Jay in *Blue Ruin* represents the fundamental conflict between his artistic goals and the commercial demands of the world through his decision-making process. Despite his disdain for it, his engagement with commercial work underscores the existential conflict between authenticity and societal conformity. Through Fugue Jay developed an extended artistic performance about disappearing from the art world which demonstrates how he wishes to evade market-driven consumption of his identity. Once he resurfaces his encounter demonstrates how people must contend with unavoidable external social elements.

The book shows how artistic success symbolizes capitalist influence since spot prices override genuine artistic merit. "The dirty money that flowed through the art world" (Kunzru 102). Through his character of Rob the author shows a real-life situation where an artist surrenders their artistic ideals to pursue commercial success. Sartre's description of people who renounce their freedom to match societal expectations generates the hostility between Jay and Rob since existential alienation results from this choice. Jay experiences heightened alienation upon returning to the art world during quarantine because everyone in this isolated circle displays both ethical and creative tendencies that suffer from system failure. The pandemic environment creates an atmosphere that intensifies awareness about existence. The complete isolation combined with uncertainty causes Jay to face his declining faith in art and his disintegrating identity. According to Sartre's concept of freedom Jay encounters the reality that his chosen actions including those made out of resistance are influenced by his social economic environment. The brief romance between Jay and Alice, together with his disillusionment with the group shows he cannot find authentic existence when his existence depends on external factors.

Through the gallery owner character Marshal, Kunzru pokes holes at the concept of artistic authenticity by turning rebellious creativity into marketable products. Through his discussions with Jay the reader learns about the moral conflict artists experience because they must choose between producing work for themselves or for what sells in

the marketplace. By embracing the absurdity of his circumstances and accepting his freedom Jay finds authenticity in rejecting all social labels set by external forces. The artist Jay experiences escalating internal turmoil because of the complex implications his decisions have for his art. Through his artistic project Fugue Jay tried to break free from social classifications by eliminating his self-identity. Through his disappearing act he creates a metaphor which represents his feelings of existential emptiness:

"The conventional answer was that a good artist was someone who had good ideas. I wanted to perform experiments to open up a richer mental world for myself. If I had better access to my subconscious, maybe I could produce images that others couldn't, or if not images, then configurations, juxtapositions, trains of thought" (Kunzru 106).

Sartre explains that freedom creates an urgent need for responsibility so Jay chooses to stay away from the art world because he does not wish to face his existential responsibilities. When Alice and Rob reappear Jay faces his unsettled psychological struggles because of his inauthentic way of living. Through his encounters with the art community Jay demonstrates how neoliberal thinking dominates artistic creation. Modern society views creativity as a commodity that turns artwork into business products which removes its social purpose and connection to human existence. Jay demonstrates similar views to Sartre by expressing his negativity about the society that restrains human freedom. Artists experience an existential crisis because they pursue authentic work within a profit-based governance system that leads to his disillusionment.

Social and economic difficulties together with pandemic-induced existential problems make it challenging for artists to find authenticity in their work. Through Jay's narrative we witness how humans continually strive for freedom against social constraints that Sartre explains in his concept of human existence. In Kunzru's artistic portrayal of disillusionment the author provides a strong analysis of contemporary art's nature and persistent existential challenges artists face in today's world. This paper evaluates *Blue Ruin* depiction of artistic independence versus public obligation using insights from Sartre's ideas. Socio-economic forces generate Jay's existential dilemmas according to the analysis of his struggles. The research adds significant value to modern literary studies of art together with ethics and human existential experience because it showcases how pandemic circumstances enhance the deep dilemmas which artists face.

V. ART AS COMMODITY: THE ARTIST'S STRUGGLE IN NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM

Neoliberal capitalism reduces artistic labor to an economic enterprise, demanding that art function within market structures rather than existing as a pure form of expression. Theodor Adorno's critique of the culture industry is particularly relevant here, as he argues that under late capitalism, art ceases to be autonomous and instead becomes a product shaped by consumer demand. Kunzru's *Blue Ruin* embodies this critique by illustrating how the protagonist's artistic identity is contingent upon external validation and economic viability rather than intrinsic creative integrity. Walter Benjamin's seminal work, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, further problematizes the status of art in a commodified world. Benjamin argues that mass reproduction erodes the artwork's aura, stripping it of its unique, authentic essence. This notion resonates with *Blue Ruin*, where the protagonist grapples with the pressure to create marketable art rather than meaningful. This study explores how Kunzru's narrative exemplifies Benjamin's anxiety—that in an era of hyper-commodification, artists must choose between authenticity and economic survival, often at the cost of their creative sovereignty.

VI. PANDEMICS AS EXISTENTIAL TRIGGERS: CONFRONTING THE ABSURD

Existential crises often emerge in moments of rupture, where the structures that define identity are destabilized. The COVID-19 pandemic, like historical plagues before it, functioned as an existential trigger, exposing human vulnerability and forcing individuals to reassess their relationship with freedom and security. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist framework, particularly his notion of radical freedom, provides a critical lens for analyzing how *Blue Ruin* presents the pandemic as a site of existential reckoning. Sartre posits that human beings are condemned to be free, meaning that in the absence of a predetermined purpose, individuals must create their meaning. The pandemic magnifies this existential weight by stripping away external distractions and leaving individuals with an intensified awareness of their mortality. In *Blue Ruin*, the protagonist faces this existential confrontation, mirroring the broader human experience of grappling with the absurd. The study interrogates how Kunzru uses the pandemic as a narrative device that forces the artist and the reader to confront the precarious nature of identity in a world where survival is never guaranteed.

VII. ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF TRANSFORMATION: THE COST OF SURVIVAL

A central question in *Blue Ruin* is whether transformation is an act of agency or a submission to external pressures. This ethical tension recalls Sartre's concept of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*), where individuals deceive themselves into believing they have no choice, thereby relinquishing their freedom. The novel's protagonist embodies this dilemma, oscillating between creative autonomy and the necessity of self-reinvention within capitalist constraints. This study also engages with contemporary critiques of precarious labor, particularly the work of Guy Standing, who defines the precariat as a class of workers trapped in unstable, insecure employment. The precarity of artistic labor in *Blue Ruin* reflects this condition, where the protagonist must continually adapt to survive within a system that offers no guarantees. The ethical stakes of this adaptation are profound—does the necessity of survival justify compromises in artistic integrity? Or does such compromise signify an erasure of authentic selfhood? Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life (*la nuda vita*) further illuminates the ethical crisis of survival in *Blue Ruin*. Agamben argues that in states of exception—such as pandemics—human life is reduced to its biological existence, stripped of political or ethical agency. This framework is useful in examining how Kunzru's characters experience a form of existential diminishment, where survival supersedes all other considerations, including artistic and ethical commitments.

VIII. CONCLUSION: ART, EXISTENCE & THE STRUGGLE FOR MEANING

Hari Kunzru's *Blue Ruin* presents a profound meditation on the existential challenges that artists face in a world dominated by neoliberal capitalism. Through the character of Jay, the novel explores the fundamental tension between artistic integrity and societal pressures, illustrating the difficulty of maintaining authenticity amidst pervasive commodification. Sartre's existentialist principles illuminate the protagonist's deeper psychological and ethical struggles, highlighting the inevitable conflict between individual freedom and external societal expectations. The analysis reveals that Jay's pursuit of freedom through his project *Fugue* ultimately underscores the complexities of human agency. His attempts to escape the art world paradoxically affirm Sartre's contention that freedom requires responsibility. The novel's depiction of the art community further illustrates how external forces can distort creative expression, reducing it to a commodity in a profit-driven world. Jay's disillusionment serves as a

broader commentary on the fragile nature of authenticity in contemporary society.

Moreover, the narrative demonstrates how moments of crisis, both personal and societal, can trigger profound existential reflection. Jay's confrontation with his past, his interactions with former friends, and his ultimate disillusionment with the art world reflect the broader human condition. This study suggests that *Blue Ruin* not only critiques the art world's commercialization but also invites a deeper examination of the ethical dimensions of artistic practice. Ultimately, Kunzru's novel provides a rich literary landscape for exploring the intersection of art, ethics, and existential philosophy. Applying Sartre's theory of freedom and authenticity offers new insights into the protagonist's internal conflicts, emphasizing the enduring relevance of existentialist thought in understanding contemporary artistic dilemmas. The research contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of art in society, the nature of human freedom, and the ethical challenges posed by a commodified creative landscape.

Through a synthesis of existential philosophy, neoliberal critique, and ethical inquiry, this study positions *Blue Ruin* as a critical exploration of the modern artist's existential and ethical crises. Kunzru's narrative demonstrates that artistic identity, once thought to be a realm of pure self-expression, is inextricably bound to systemic pressures that commodify creativity and dictate the terms of survival. The novel compels readers to confront an essential question: Can true artistic autonomy exist in a world that demands perpetual adaptation? Ultimately, *Blue Ruin* does not provide easy answers but instead foregrounds the tensions that define contemporary artistic existence. In doing so, it reinforces Sartre's assertion that freedom is both a privilege and a burden that requires continuous negotiation within a world where selfhood and survival are often at odds. Making art becomes an assertion of agency, a defiance against commodification, and perhaps the last refuge of authenticity in a world increasingly driven by economic imperatives.

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