

Lal Ded as an Existentialist Poet: Parallels between Vakhs and the Existentialist Thought

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Abstract: *At its core, this paper explores and analyses the poetry of the celebrated Kashmiri poetess and mystical figure - Lal Ded - by drawing parallels between her poetry and the Existentialist thought, thereby positioning her as an early existentialist voice in the literary tradition; particularly by highlighting the profound sense of individual autonomy and personal responsibility found in her Vakhs - themes that align closely with Existentialist philosophy. This paper also contends that her work, though rooted in the mysticism of Kashmiri Shaivism, anticipates the existentialist focus on individual freedom, absurdity, and authenticity - principles that were later articulated by philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus in the formalisation of Existentialism. Ultimately, this research aims to bring attention to the literary excellence of the poetry of Lal Ded, making her far more than just a folk figure and therefore establishing her as a key literary icon and one of the precursors of a key theory in the field of literature.*

Keywords: Lal Ded, existentialism, poetry, Kashmiri Shaivism, Albert Camus, Absurdism, individual freedom, mysticism, Jean-Paul Sartre, 14th Century Kashmir, existentialist philosophy

1. Introduction

As a philosophical identity, Existentialism focuses on individual freedom, choice, and the search for meaning in an inherently indifferent universe. While acknowledging this inherently indifferent nature of the universe, existentialism urges individuals to find their own meaning in life. Upon going through multiple viewpoints on the theory, one can conclude that Existentialism is basically a philosophical idea which is based on the concept that the universe is indifferent to the whims and actions of man, and so, if man wants to find meaning in this universe, he needs to create that meaning for himself. It is important to note that even though Existentialism formally evolved during the mid to late 19th century, one can find that many poets and writers have inculcated Existentialist ideas and themes in their works that predate the formal establishment of the theory. And this paper aims to study one such poet – Lal Ded – a 14th Century poetess and mystic figure from the valley of Kashmir in India.

Believed to be born somewhere between 1317 and 1320 in a Brahman family in either Pampore or Pandrenthan near Srinagar, Lal Ded, commonly known as Lalla, is looked upon by people of all faiths and cultures in the region and beyond. Lal Ded's verses are known as 'Vakhs', which essentially means "saying" or "utterance". It is similar to the Sanskrit words *Vāc*, which means "speech" and *Vākya*, which means "saying". Kashmiri began to emerge, as a modern language, from the Sanskrit-descended Apabramśa-prakrit that had been the common language of the region through the first millennium CE (Hoskote xi). Lal Ded and her Vakhs are not just an amalgamation of various Kashmiri cultures, but also a universal cry of suffering and injustice. Her poetry is one that binds people; her word transcends religious barriers and social divisions, striking common chords in the hearts of people everywhere. But one might wonder what a 14th Century poetess from the valley of Kashmir has to do with this predominantly French philosophy that was developed long after her death. To explore and answer that very question by highlighting the thematic parallels between the verses of Lal Ded and the Existentialist theory is the main intention of this study. By studying Lal Ded's poetry under the lens of existentialist philosophy, this paper aims to throw light on her

as an existential poet and highlight the timeless relevance and philosophical dimensions of her work, thereby justifying the title of this research paper – Lal Ded as an Existentialist poet.

2. Review of Literature

While there has been significant research in the field of Existentialism as well as on Lal Ded separately, there hasn't been any formal research that links the Vakhs and ideology of Lal Ded to the theories of Existentialism. However, in order to link the two aforementioned fields of study, it is important to have substantial knowledge of the involved concepts individually. To do that, multiple works have been reviewed and consulted in order to fulfil the required understanding necessary for this study:

Lal Ded's Vakhs have been of interest to and translated by a number of prominent writers, a testament to the timeless relevance of her poetry. For instance, Ranjit Hoskote in his book I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded provides a translation of around 149 Vakhs of Lal Ded along with an introduction that extensively discusses Lal Ded as a mystical figure in Kashmiri literature and situates her within the broader context of Sufi and Hindu traditions. He also reflects on the nature of her poetry, emphasizing her direct and personal engagement with the divine, and serves as a bridge between Lalla's world and modern readers, inviting them into her profound insights. This book also serves as the primary source of this research paper.

In his book LAL- The Best of Kashmiri Literature published in 2022, the famous Kashmiri poet, writer, and critic Shafi Shauq explores Kashmiri literature and its rich poetic traditions, with Lal Ded as the central focus. He captures the essence of her teachings and her connection to Kashmiri Literature. Through this work, Shauq presents an extensive study of Lal Ded and her Vakhs with respect to background, themes and writing techniques.

In her paper titled "Lal Ded and Meerabai: A Feminist Perspective" published in 2017, Dr. Wasia studies Lal Ded under the lens of feminism. She analyses the feminist undertones in Lalla's poetry and subsequently discusses her

on a social, political, and cultural level. This paper brings new perspectives to the poetry of Lal Ded and enhances our vision on Lal Ded as a poetess. This paper also alludes to the fact that Lalla's poetry was far more intricate than simple moral sayings- she was a visionary whose poetry was replete with strong beliefs and complex ideas, feminism being one of those ideas.

There has also been an admirable amount of research on the topic of Existentialism. For instance, the article "Existentialism" by F. C. Copleston, published in the journal *Philosophy* in 1948, provides a comprehensive overview of existentialist thought by exploring key themes in existentialism, such as the nature of existence, freedom, and the search for meaning. Influential philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Søren Kierkegaard are also discussed and their contributions to the movement are analysed. The article helps the reader understand the foundations and implications of existentialist philosophy.

In his book titled *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, originally delivered as a lecture in 1945, Jean-Paul Sartre outlines the key principles of Existentialism. He discusses key Existentialist ideas like 'existence precedes essence', freedom and responsibility, humanism, and also presents a critique of traditional philosophies. He also discusses the idea that humans are "condemned to be free." This means that even when one tries to escape responsibility by conforming to societal norms or authority, they ultimately cannot avoid making choices and thus remain responsible for those choices. This work is a passionate defence of existentialist philosophy, emphasizing human freedom, responsibility, and the capacity for self-definition in a seemingly indifferent universe.

3. Methodology

This study encompasses the characteristics of a Qualitative, Analytical and Theoretical Research as it involves an in depth, qualitative analysis of Lal Ded's poetry followed by the application of the Existentialist theory and subsequent justification of Lal Ded as an Existentialist poet.

To fulfil its objectives, the paper has been organized into four sections - a general introduction, followed by three sections, out of which the second section is further divided into sub-sections. The first section presents a historical and cultural context of Lal Ded's poetry in an attempt to examine the culture and environment that presumably fostered her Existentialist mindset. The second section includes a comparative study of core Existentialist themes and how they transpire in Lal Ded's poetry, thereby solidifying the argument that Lal Ded can be proclaimed as an Existentialist poet. This section will also compare her philosophy with the philosophies of key Existentialist thinkers like Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Finally, the study will be concluded in the third section by means of a brief crux of what has been discussed throughout the paper.

Existentialism – An Introduction

Merriam Webster defines existentialism as "a chiefly 20th century philosophical movement embracing diverse doctrines but centring on analysis of individual existence in an

unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad." ("Existentialism."). As mentioned earlier, the foundational concept of Existentialism is that man has to create his own meaning in a universe that is inherently indifferent. It is arguably one of the most subjective theories in literature and art. And that is because all the pioneers of this theory had somewhat differed takes on it. For instance, while both Jean Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel were well-known existentialists, their definitions and understanding of the concept of existentialism varies from one another. While Sartre time and again denies the existence of God, saying "Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality." (Sartre), Marcel on the other hand finds his meaning in the pursuit of God and religion:

Marcel's thought has a clear religious dimension, and he recognized early on that it was leading him in a religious direction even though he then had no strong religious beliefs and no formal religious upbringing. His thinking led to his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1929, and he is now often referred to as a theistic or Christian existentialist ("Gabriel Honoré Marcel: Religious Belief").

One can, therefore, substantiate that Existentialism is not a closed concept with an inflexible definition, but rather a subjective acceptance of some fundamental ideas open to interpretation. It would thus be unfair to condense the concept of Existentialism in one single definition.

To treat existentialism as a philosophy is no more possible than to treat idealism as a philosophy. The reason is obvious. Jean-Paul Sartre is an existentialist and Gabriel Marcel is also an existentialist; but the philosophy of Sartre is not the same as the philosophy of Marcel. One can no more speak of the philosophy of Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, Marcel and Berdyaev, as though they maintained the same system, than one could speak of the philosophy of Plato, Berkeley and Hegel, as though one philosophy was common to the three thinkers (Copleston 19).

However, it is important to note that while it is unfair to settle on a universal and objective notion of Existentialism and Existential philosophy, one cannot deny that the overall concept of Existentialism is laid on some common foundational conceptions. Some core concepts, like the concept of individuality and "essence precedes existence" are the basis of every subsequent theory or concept associated with Existentialism. No matter how different the approach of various existential thinkers is, their foundational beliefs remain unanimous.

Nevertheless, even if it is difficult to find a doctrinal content which is common and at the same time peculiar to the existentialist philosophies, we all know that the word existentialism has objective reference and that it is not unreasonable to group together Kierkegaard, Jaspers,

Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Marcel, however great and however important the differences between their respective philosophies may be. I suppose that in the first place one can link them together by their common rejection, explicit or implicit, of all forms of "totalitarian" philosophy, using the word "totalitarian" not in its political sense (primarily at least) but as signifying any philosophy which minimizes the position and importance of the individual as the free, self-transcending subject and as the central datum of experience (22).

This paper will draw parallels to these core existentialist themes and Lal Ded's poetry, so as to fulfil its objective.

Lal Ded – Historical and Cultural Background

The 14th Century mystic poetess Lal Ded is a renowned figure in Kashmiri literature and theology. Her poetry touches various topics- sorrow, helplessness, hope, faith, individuality, and even social issues. She spoke with honesty and she spoke without fear, wandering from place to place spreading her word, after abandoning her abusive husband and oppressive in laws. "Her (Lal Ded's) domestic life was a troubled one. Suspicious of her meditative absorptions and visits to shrines, her husband treated her cruelly; her mother-in-law often starved her" (Hoskote xvii). This ill treatment eventually led her to flee home, wandering from street to street reciting her poetry. Perhaps it is because of this diverse, raw, and honest nature of her poetry that today, Lal Ded is admired and claimed by various religions and religious communities across the region. "It is true that Lal Ded was constructed differently by each community, but she was simultaneously Lalleshviri or Lalla Yogini to the Hindus and Lal-Arifa to the Muslims" (x).

Her Vakhs offer a captivating subject for theoretical and philosophical inquiry because of their deep spiritual and existential themes. Seemingly personal in nature, her verses are characterized by their mystical depth and timeless advice. Although Lal Ded's life and work predates the formal initiation and expansion of Existentialism by several centuries, one can, with just a little introspection, draw parallels between her word and the Existentialist thought.

But before discerning their Existential connotations, one needs to contextually understand Lal Ded's Vakhs, and that requires an understanding of the historical and cultural framework of the era in which she lived. Lal Ded's outlook, and therefore her work, is rooted in the spiritual and philosophical traditions of Kashmir during the 14th century, an overview of which gives us some insights on the environment she lived in and was influenced by.

It is a well-known fact that Lal Ded's poetry is profoundly influenced by Kashmiri Shaivism, which is an intricate system of *religio-philosophy*. Commonly known as Trika Shastra, this philosophy emphasizes the concept of non-dualism. "In Trika, spirit and matter are not two different things but are fundamentally one in two different forms. Spirit is matter and matter is not inert as is commonly believed. Being a form of the spirit it is of conscious character; only there exist variations of consciousness of the spirit within it. Differences between what we call living and non-living pieces of matter are nothing but those degrees of

consciousness" (Bazaz 256). The ultimate goal of human existence, according to this philosophy, is to apprehend one's unity with this divine consciousness. Lal Ded's Vakhs also reflect this perception through their emphasis on the discovery and connection with an individual's inner consciousness and the rejection of external rituals and symbols.

*One shrine to the next, the hermit can't stop for breath.
Soul, get this! You should have looked in the mirror
Going on a pilgrimage is like falling in love
With the greenness of faraway grass.
(Hoskote 3)*

As is clear from the cited verse, Lal Ded implies that what one seeks to find in shrines can be found if one looks in the mirror, that is, if one looks within oneself. She goes on to say that pilgrimages perpetuate nothing but a fabricated notion that one will find meaning conventional religious practices. According to Lal Ded, one only needs to connect with their spirit to find that meaning. The unification of matter and spirit is what she believes in – her verses frequently explore themes of divine presence within one's own individual self, a concept that resonates with the non-dualistic view of Kashmiri Shaivism.

*Wrapped up in Yourself, You hid from me.
All day I looked for You
and when I found You hiding inside me,
I ran wild, playing now me, now You.
(17)*

One can conclude from this verse that Lal Ded supports the notion that the divine is hiding within us, all we have to do is look for him at the right place; and once we do, we'll be free.

Lal Ded's Vakhs are also characterized by their mystical and spiritual undertones. Mysticism is defined by Merriam Webster as "the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience (such as intuition or insight)" ("Mysticism."). For Lalla, that subjective experience was looking for divinity and focusing on finding the divine within oneself and the quest for inner transformation. Her poetry lays focus on subjective spiritual understanding and the quest for individual insight.

*Love-mad, I, Lalla, started out,
Spent days and nights on the trail.
Circling back, I found the teacher in my own house.
What brilliant luck, I said, and hugged him.
(Hoskote 15)*

Lal Ded says that she, in her desperation to find her meaning in life, spent a very long time searching the divine, only to find him in her own self. She then says that she embraced this divinity that lied within her own self, urging people to do the same. While her Vakhs are deeply rooted in religious beliefs, it is quite evident that the central focus of her poetry was finding individuality and God within oneself. One can say, therefore, that even though Lalla's verses drive great influence from core religious concepts, it wasn't her only approach. Her prime focus, therefore, was on human individuality – as is of any existential philosopher.

While studying about Lal Ded, it is also important to know the political and cultural landscape of the period that she lived in. The 14th century was an era of many significant cultural political and changes in the valley, with significant shifts in power and authority, which naturally had an effect on the cultural landscape too. Lal Ded's poetry bears witness to these happenings; exploring existential and spiritual themes amidst a shifting political environment.

Gourmet meals and elegant clothes can't buy you peace of mind.

Only they climb higher, who have left delusion behind.

(83)

As can be concluded from this verse, she was a critic of extravagance, and advised people to focus on climbing the ladder of spirituality, rather than the social hierarchy. As with most poets, the cultural and political changes of her time had a significant hand in shaping Lal Ded's perspectives and overall outlook. With its main focus on individuality and rejection of conventional norms, her poetry can also be seen as a response to the cultural and political dynamics of her era.

Existentialist Themes in Lal Ded's Poetry

Just like any other philosophical theory, Existentialism too has some root characteristic themes that later branch out into diverse interpretations by different philosophers. These key themes can be discussed individually with respect to Lal Ded's philosophy and works.

1) Existence Precedes Essence

A concept most closely associated with the 20th-century existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, "existence precedes essence" essentially means that individuals primarily exist, and then characterize themselves through their thoughts and actions, as opposed to having a predefined 'essence' or nature. "Existential philosophy holds that existence precedes essence; that is, man is meaninglessly existent but ever free to choose and define his essential self through his acts, Man is therefore responsible for all he says and does" (Halper 52). Upon analysis of Lal Ded's Vakhs through an existential lens, one can argue that her word reflects a similar idea. Delving into the interconnection between the nature of an individual and the divine, her poetry advocates for a journey of self-discovery and realization.

Don't flail about like a man wearing a blindfold.

Believe me, He's in here.

Come in and see for yourself.

You'll stop hunting for Him all over

(Hoskote 44)

In the above cited verse, she criticizes conventional religious practices, comparing those who follow them to a man wearing a blindfold, and then goes on to say that the divine is within you, advising people to stop aimlessly looking for him in other places. Her stress on individual experience and personal spiritual realization over man-made customs and religious dogma align with the existentialist thought that individuals define their own essence by means of their personal experience. For Lalla, the divine is not something that should be imposed from outside, but found and brought into existence through inner experience and self-discovery. Therefore, her poetry can be seen, in a way, as an articulation

of a form of existentialism in which the discovery and knowledge of oneself comes before any predefined essence or external definitions of spirituality.

Often considered the father of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard also emphasized the role and importance of the personal understanding of faith and the discovery of one's authentic existence. His work draws attention to the importance of understanding faith on a subjective level, and understanding it in terms of one's personal belief. Lalla's poetry and ideas harmoniously align with Kierkegaard's existentialist thoughts by means of their focus on personal spiritual discovery and the rejection of conventional religious practices

My Master gave me just one rule:

Forget the outside, get to the inside of things.

I, Lalla, took that teaching to heart.

From that day, I've danced naked.

(97)

The concept of nakedness is used as a zeugma to imply a direct opposition to the conventional association of religion with modesty as well as a metaphor for being stripped of all conventional norms and practices and dancing to the beat of her heart, that is, following and understanding the Divine in a subjective way, in a way that sits right with her, while forgetting what the outside world tells her to do. She rejects the prescriptive practices of religion and life and emphasizes subjectivity and personal discovery.

Lalla's concept of a direct, internal, and subjective spiritual experience mirrors Kierkegaard's concept of individual discovery of faith and the confines of conventional norms. One can, therefore, conclude that both, Lal Ded and Kierkegaard, consider a personal, direct encounter and a subjective understanding of the divine as the key to authentic existence. Kierkegaard's existentialism, with its heart in individual discovery and the subjectivity of faith, resonates with Lal Ded's concept of personal spiritual insight and rejection of conventional religious norms.

2) Search for Authenticity

Placing major emphasis on the pursuit of authenticity, Existentialism urges individuals to discover their true self, accept it, and thereby live in harmony with it rather than conforming to societal expectations. In a similar sense, Lalla's poetry also dotes on this search for authenticity; be it through its persistent critique of conventional religious practices or through its encouragement to focus on inner divine experience. Her Vakhs defy the superficiality of ritualistic practices and vouch for discovering the divine within oneself.

The concept of living an authentic life is one of the core existentialist concepts, and that includes making choices that reveal one's true nature rather than adhering to conventional norms. Lalla's work aligns with this concept by criticizing the superficiality of conventional religious practice. For instance, she writes:

Fool, you won't find your way out by praying from a book.

The perfume on your carcass won't give you a clue.

Focus on the Self.

That's the best advice you can get.

(43)

Somewhat similar to Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept that one cannot discover new and authentic ideas if he only looks for them in books, Lal Ded also says in the above verse that trying to find meaning and authenticity in books or carcasses will lead you nowhere; if you want to find that authenticity, you have to focus on your own self other than these conventional dogmas.

*Those who glow with the light of the Self
Are freed from life even while they live.
But fools add knots by the hundred
To the tangled net of the world.
(127)*

Calling those who rely on religious practices and give in to the worldly notions of faith fools, Lal Ded further lengthens her philosophy that one can only find authenticity in their own self and their own personal understanding of the divine. And when one succeeds in doing so, they are freed from the constraints of mundane life and societal norms. Just as Jean-Paul Sartre advocates for individuals to create their own essence through their choices and actions, Lal Ded also suggests that spiritual consciousness is attained through personal introspection and self-discovery, rather than conventional practices or adherence to societal norms.

3) Confrontation with the Absurd

As articulated by the French philosopher Albert Camus, the concept of the absurd refers to the struggle between man's persistent quests to find meaning in the inherent meaninglessness of the universe. Lalla's poetry also recognizes this concept by highlighting the limitations of human understanding. She often talks about the concept of 'nothingness' and the inherent meaninglessness of the universe in her verses.

*They kept coming, they kept coming, now they've got to go.
They've got to keep moving, day or night,
And where they came from, there they've got to go.
From nothing to nothing to nothing and why?
(10)*

As is obvious from the above verse, Lalla's Vakhs had absurdist undertones as well. Her concept of cyclic nothingness resonates with the absurdist nature of the universe. Some of her Vakhs also have a hint of being lost; furthering the argument that her poetry was also somewhat absurdist in nature.

*I'm carrying this sack of candy, its knot gone slack on my shoulder.
I took a wrong turn and wasted my day, what's to be done?
I'm lost, my teacher's warning blisters me like a whiplash.
This flock has no shepherd, what's to be done?
(12)*

This verse shows themes of being lost and dejection which are quite synonymous with the absurdist identities. The words "This flock has no shepherd" further substantiate the lack of direction and assurance in where one's headed to, which also resonates with the absurdist concept of the futility of trying to find direction in life.

Lal Ded understood the inherently indifferent nature of the universe and found her peace in it. One can even call her idea of faith and submission to the creator her way of finding meaning in a meaningless universe. Traditional absurdism, as exemplified by Albert Camus, holds that there are three possible responses to absurdism: suicide, religious belief, or revolting against the absurd ("Absurdism," "Possible Responses"). Camus argues that the search for meaning is inherently futile, however, individuals can still find significance in their own personal ways. Therefore, we can say that from an absurdist point of view, Lal Ded's emphasis on faith and the discovery of the divine was her response to the meaninglessness of the world.

4) The Quest for Meaning

The search for meaning is a central theme in existentialist philosophy. Existentialists focus on how to find a purpose in a seemingly indifferent world. Lal Ded's poetry also focuses on this pursuit, urging people to transcend worldly attachments in order to seek a higher spiritual understanding. Her emphasis on transcending worldly concerns and subsequently grasp a deeper understanding of the divine reflects existentialist themes of finding meaning past superficial or materialistic pursuits.

*You're not happy ruling a kingdom,
You're not happy giving it away.
But if you're free of desire, you're free of dilemma.
Living, you're dead already, and can never die.
(89)*

After coming to the conclusion that man cannot find happiness and contentment in worldly things, be it ruling a kingdom or giving it away, Lal Ded says that the only way to be truly content is to be free of all worldly desires. When one is free of desires, they're as good as dead, as it is desire that separates living from the dead, and what is dead can never die. Therefore, in her own eccentric way, Lal Ded is saying that being free of desires immortalizes man.

4. Conclusion

It is the mystical and religious traditions of Kashmir Shaivism that form the foot of Lal Ded's poetry, yet it shows acute existentialist shades. The present study of the works of Lal Ded against the background of Existentialist themes brings to the forefront the core depth of philosophy underlying her poetry, adding to the greater meaning of her spiritual and Existential insights. This research on Lal Ded as an Existentialist poet opens her work to basic philosophical concerns with authenticity, meaning, and personal responsibility. Her poetry represents a gold mine of reflection for those who search for understanding at the juncture between mysticism, existentialism, and human experience.

In the end, Lal Ded's poetry is important evidence of the presence of Existentialist thought before its development into a philosophical theory. Her exploration of spiritual and existential themes creates a profound reflection of the nature of human existence and the search for meaning that highlights the timeless relevance of her work in both historical and philosophical contexts.

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