

Existentialist Crossroads: A Discourse Analysis of *Me before You* and *The Theory of Everything*

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Abstract

*This research explores and compares the rationale behind two different choices of the individuals mired in grim circumstances in their lives as presented in the two movies *Me Before You* and *The Theory of Everything* through the discourse analysis of the script. The current study focuses on the existentialist perspective shown by the protagonists in the two movies; Will Traynor and Stephen Hawking. The existentialist tenets propounded by Søren Aabye Kierkegaard have been employed, focusing upon subjectivity, the authenticity of an individual, and freedom of choice. The study explores how Will Traynor and Stephen Hawking deal with their disabilities in the light of existentialism. The discourse analysis of the movies reveals the existential crises of both protagonists and their approaches to work their way out of it.*

1. Introduction

Literature represents and preserves human experiences in various forms. The word literature is derived from a Latin word *Littera* which means 'letters' and it refers to the association with the written word. However, in contemporary times, literature is not confined to the written form only, it has popularized in oral and visual forms as well. The current study focuses on the existentialist perspective presented in the two movies *Me Before You* and *The Theory of Everything* through discourse analysis of the scripts. The existentialist tenets propounded by Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855) have been employed to focus upon subjectivity, the authenticity of an individual and freedom of choice. It explores how Will Traynor and Stephen Hawking deal with their disabilities in the light of existentialism.

The film industry has revolutionized the world of literature from 'letters' to visuals. It has a powerful impact on the structure of a society (Haq & Masroor, 2018; Sheikh et al. 2018). In the present-day, the novels are adapted into films to engage with the audience that prefers visuals to reading. Themes that were once explored only in written literature are now visualized and displayed on screens in different forms such as the theme of existentialist philosophy and theory that have been applied to films directly or indirectly. Film critics and audiences can extract meaning and study the films through an existentialist lens. The word 'existentialism' comes from the Latin word 'existere' which means to 'stand out' or become. It is a movement in literature and philosophy that emphasizes individual freedom, free will, and choice. It is based on the idea that 'humans define their own meaning in life and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe'.

The movie adaptation of the novel *Me Before You* falls under the domain of 'young-adult fiction' and 'romance' subgenre but a deeper analysis reveals that it is about freedom of an individual to make choices, the responsibility that comes with those choices and its importance in human life. *Me Before You* is written by a famous English romance novelist and screenwriter Jojo Moyes. The screenplay of the movie adaptation of the novel has been written by the writer herself. The story revolves around twenty-six-year-old Louisa Clark who lives with her working-class family and goes through minor ups and downs in her ordinary life until she loses her job, sets to find a new one which happens to be as a companion for Will Traynor- a successful, wealthy, once active young man who developed quadriplegia in an accident two years earlier. When Louisa enters Traynor's world, she finds him bitter, rough and resentful of his life. They do not get along at the beginning, but Traynor becomes communicative as they share experiences. Clark discovers about Traynor's suicide attempt, which leaves her shocked. Traynor gets his parents' word to take him to an assisted suicide facility 'Dignitas'. Traynor does not want to live the rest of his life in a wheelchair. However, it is important to highlight that Will Traynor used to be an active and adventurous person before he met the life-changing accident that left him physically paralyzed and made him question his existence and purpose. Existentialism appears to be hinging on the discourse alongside the sweet romance between the two main characters.

The movie *The Theory of Everything* falls under the domain of 'biography, drama' and romance subgenre. The screenplay has been written by Anthony McCarten which is based on a book written by Jane Hawking. *The Theory of Everything* is a story of the most

celebrated theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking, and an art student, he falls in love with and marries while both of them are studying at Cambridge in the 1960s. Stephen Hawking is a bright and determined student, but little is expected of him after the diagnosis of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). The nerves that control his body start to shut down gradually due to ALS. Doctors tell him that his muscles will eventually degenerate and he has a maximum of two years to live. The news shocks him at first, but Jane Wilde stands by him during this hard time. They get married and Hawking continues to bring revolution in the field of physics. He does not let his disability come in the way of his success. His body becomes frail and deteriorates, but his mind remains sharp. He discovers the meaning of his life in finding out the single equation that would explain the indefinable “Theory of Everything”. In the beginning, he feels that he has lost the meaning in life, faces an existential crisis, and questions his existence, but that meaninglessness or hopelessness is transient. Despite his disability, wheel-chair bound life, and machine-dependent voice, he believes “however bad life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at. While there is life, there is hope” (The Theory of Everything, 2014).

The protagonists of both movies face existential crises after encountering tragic situations in life. They are left paralyzed and the physical hindrance leads to a crisis that inhibits purposeful existence, therefore forcing them to reevaluate life, its purpose and all that they had ever known. But their approaches towards life, ways to find meaning and purpose set a major contrast between their personalities. The struggle to find meaning in life is studied using the lens of the existential theory by the founder of existentialism Søren Aabye Kierkegaard who, in the nineteenth century, posed the essential existential question ‘what it means to exist’? He is known as the father of existentialism. Kierkegaard emphasized the subjective existence of an individual, his freedom to choose, and the necessity of choosing. In the selected movies both protagonists exercise their freedom of choice and try to find meaning and purpose, after facing existential crises.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

After the two world wars, when Europe faced a crisis of death and destruction, existentialism began to take hold as a movement centred in France. The destruction, anxiety, depression and uncertainty followed by the two world wars shattered confidence of man in authority, religion and himself. This is something that has permeated into every modern man’s life up to this date, especially a person who faces traumatic situations like paralyzing accident, begins to reevaluate existence, the meaning of life and the purpose of being. He/she tries to make decisions, based on personal experience in an irrational world and tries to make life meaningful in whatever way possible.

This study contemplates the existential crisis that any person, especially someone who meets an accident that may even disable them physically, experiences in life. The physical hindrance leads to a crisis that inhibits purposeful existence, therefore forcing one to reevaluate life. This is something that any person can face in their life and is an issue that must be acknowledged. It is important to understand an individual’s subjective experience and journey to find purpose in life.

1.2. Significance of the Study

The present study carries significance for the people by presenting choices of two individuals dealing with existential crises in their lives. There is a plethora of news published across the world about the suicides every day. Pakistani society also witnesses such occurrences on a daily basis. The circumstances leading to an individual's act of committing suicide may be different, trivial, or grave, but the act itself points out that such individuals cannot think of any other option. This study, by analyzing the two different approaches of two individuals, will be extremely helpful for the people facing existentialist crises in their lives to be able to have a cognitive approach towards finding meaning to their existence. Furthermore, it shows that there are endless possibilities in life, it is the duty of an individual to exercise his or her freedom of choice in the best way. The search for meaning and purpose is something all individuals seek in life. Thus, the current study can be of great value even if one such individual thinks of some other course of action than that of suicide.

1.3. Research Objectives

This study aims:

- To observe the existentialist crisis shown in the discourse of the movies, *Me Before You* and *The Theory of Everything*.
- To evaluate the existentialism shown in the main characters of the two moves, Will Traynor and Stephen Hawking in the light of Søren Kierkegaard's theoretical framework.

2. Literature Review

Existentialism is a 20th-century philosophical movement that holds 'diverse doctrines' but focuses on the study of individual existence in an immeasurable universe where an individual takes ultimate responsibility for his acts based on free will, without any specific knowledge of right or wrong ("Definition of Existentialism," n.d.).

Existentialism is a response against traditional philosophies, such as Rationalism, Empiricism (practical evidence), and Positivism, which seek to discover an eventual order and universal meaning in metaphysical principles or the structure of the observed world. It asserts that people make decisions based on what has meaning to them, rather than what is rational.

The roots of existentialism are in the writings of Danish philosopher Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855). He criticized the literary and philosophical institutions of his day for "misrepresenting the highest task of human existence—namely, becoming oneself in an ethical and religious sense" (Westphal, 2014). Kierkegaard is known as the 'Father of Existentialism', during his time, Denmark became a capitalist society. Due to the social factors like immigration from rural to urban areas, universal elementary education, and mobility, the whole societal structure transformed into a conservative one. It became

difficult for an individual to be who he/she was. Kierkegaard felt the need to come up with a form that did not imitate stereotyped identities. He looked for rhetoric that would provide people with a platform to use their resources, free will, and subjectivity. He pointed out that, in the past, Socrates used irony to promote individuality and subjectivity in his interlocutors. Kierkegaard used the same technique of irony, parody, and humor to make the conventionally accepted forms unsustainable. He constantly annoyed his contemporaries with 'discomforting thoughts'. Kierkegaard used indirect communication methods with his readers, used pseudonyms to distance himself from the texts to subvert his authority to place responsibility on the reader for extracting existential meaning from the writings (McDonald, 2002).

The other main contributors to this ideology can be roughly divided into two groups i.e. German philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Jaspers (1883-1969), and Heidegger (1889-1976), and French writers like Sartre (1905-1980) and Camus (1913-1960). Nietzsche wrote several books and contributed to the existential philosophy, he stated that the traditional ideals have lost their value because the future appears to be meaningless and purposeless. In his book, *The Gay Science* Nietzsche writes the major concerns with morality and eternal recurrence. He talks about the proclamation of the death of God. In "The Parable of the Madman", Nietzsche has specified that humans are responsible for their actions and Christian morality is no more there to guide them. He believes that there are no natural or objective rights, and old truths have lost their validity. The parable narrates the story of a madman searching for God when he asks the people about it; they yell and laugh at his inquiry. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him-you and I. All of us are his murderers" (Nietzsche, 2011, p. 181).

Jaspers (1883-1969) was a German psychiatrist and philosopher. He is recognized as one of the most significant existentialist philosophers of the twentieth century. He received his medical degree from the University of Heidelberg's medical school in 1908 after switching from Law to medicine. Littlejohn in his book *Theories of Human Communication* credits Karl Jaspers as one of the most noteworthy critics of mass society (Littlejohn, 1983).

Gordon, in his article, asserts that Jaspers has not been given the due credit as a major contributor to existentialist philosophy, even though he stands as one of the most important existentialists (Gordon, 2000). Gordon states that Jaspers did not ignore the evil side of human personality; hitherto he thought that each individual has a choice and a chance within their life to exercise existentialist choices that have consequences. He states that for Jaspers an individual's point of view is his will to power. Jaspers stands against the theories and paradigms that believe in absolutes. He says:

At the end, we have no firm ground under us, no principle to hold on to, but a suspension of thought in an infinite space-without shelter in conceptual systems, without refuge in firm knowledge or faith. And even this suspended, floating structure of thought is only one metaphor of Being among others (Jaspers & Schilpp, 1957, p. 112).

Gordon states that Jaspers focuses on "the role of communication in forging identity and humanity". He sees interpersonal communication to be the chief source of human identity, and existence (Gordon, 2000, p. 111).

In one of his lectures delivered in Paris in 1945, Sartre presents a defense against the criticism on existentialism, which according to him, is humanism as it values human subjectivity (Sartre, 1946). According to him, critics think that existentialists strengthen and stress on the wicked side of a human being. They recognize existentialism with ugliness and relate this with naturalism as well. He rejects the set traditional beliefs and label of being a pessimist. What is common in existential atheists and Christians, is “existence comes before essence” (Sartre, 1946). According to Kant’s philosophy, the range of human nature is wide enough that it applies to a man from the woods as well as the most civilized ones. According to atheistic existentialists, human nature is not defined as there is no creator. Humans exist and develop their nature later as per their experiences and concepts, this is what we call “subjectivity” and it is considered as the first idea of existentialism. Two aspects need to be understood about the subjectivity of existentialists: first, there is freedom of choice for human beings; second, that choice should regard other human beings too, but critics rarely comprehend both aspects. There is a difference between secular moralism and existentialism. Existentialists condemn the freedom of human beings. They state that if there is freedom of choice then there is anguish to choose one between two moralities, and religion does not help them in the case (Sartre, 1946).

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

Discourse analysis has been utilized for analyzing and comparing the film scripts of *Me before You* and *The Theory of Everything* from the existentialist perspective, provided by Soren Kierkegaard, under the ambit of film studies. Therefore, the theoretical framework of the present study comprises the fusion of existentialism with film studies through discourse analysis.

Leo Braudy and Marshal Cohen in their seminal work titled *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* have included several essays about the relationship between cinema and other forms of art including literature. Movies in the present age of digital technology have assumed the same role of imparting instruction and delight which was once considered solely as the domain of literary texts. Christian Metz in his essay “Identification, Mirror” highlights the supreme effects of cinematic artifacts as being “more perceptual than many other means of expression; it mobilizes a large number of the axes of perception” (Braudy & Cohen, 2009, p. 694). It implies that movies are more instrumental in the projection of a point of view or movement than other forms of art. That is why cinema has been used as a major tool for propaganda by various groups in the 20th and 21st centuries. Furthermore, according to Metz, the world of a film provides a mirror in the same way the real world provides for constructing the images of a child (p. 696). Thus, it is a reasonable medium for a piece of discourse to be analyzed from a particular lens in the same way as literary works can be interpreted from multiple lenses called theories.

Kierkegaard’s existentialist philosophy is based upon the virtue of love and individual will. According to Guignon (2004), Kierkegaard’s existentialist thought provides a room for the exertion of individual will during different phases of life as each one of these phases “has its own intelligibility and standards within itself” (p. 4). Therefore, it is up to the individual

to adopt any course of action according to his discretion at any stage in his life where he may have the freedom to choose one course of action from multiple options. Although Kierkegaard's views are largely connected to his religious affinity, yet the religious base of his arguments can facilitate to comprehend the "possibility of self-fulfillment and the achievement of intensity in life through non-religious forms of commitment" (Guignon, 2004, P.5). Thus, his philosophy is in marked contrast to other existentialist thinkers because he deals with the man's problem of existence in a meaningful and optimistic manner by calling for the freedom of an individual to do anything that he may deem essential for attaining perfection or for coming out of the dilemma of his existence.

Kierkegaard declared, "subjectivity is truth". His focus on subjectivity is about the inwardness of an individual and his ability to rely upon his personality rather than the objective truth. According to Wahl, this dogma is related to the doctrine of how. The critical thing is not the belief, but the way in which one believes in that object (Wahl & LORY, 1969). Kierkegaard gave the concept of authenticity and unauthenticity. According to him, an individual's knowing himself and choosing himself are the states of becoming authentic. He believes that losing oneself in the crowd is much easier than becoming authentic because it does not require believing in oneself. Any person who finds it perilous to be himself starts to rely on the crowd rather than freedom, choice, and subjective truth.

Kierkegaard believes in individuality and, through his writings, promotes an authentic life, rather than following the crowd. For him, individuality is where the purpose of life may be found. He stressed, "the most basic choice faced by human beings ...whether to acknowledge their freedom or attempt to evade it" (West, 2011). Anxiety followed by existentialist crisis needs to be addressed by exercising the freedom of choice and thus becoming authentic. Through his work, Kierkegaard stressed the importance of an individual's subjective truth.

3.2. Research Method

Discourse analysis is a method to analyze the patterns of language in a text from a particular angle. Since the basic purpose of any language is to communicate, so it is a helpful tool to analyze the use of language in any kind of discourse to explore the motifs, themes, and implications of a particular text or speech. There can be multiple ways of communicating a specific idea, but it is the manner of saying or writing that gives birth to the multiplicity of meanings. The terms of "situated meanings" and "cultural models" are central to Gee's explanation of discourse analysis (Gee, 2014, p. 80). A meaning is situated when it is derived from a single point in the text by looking at it keeping in the mind the context, whereas "cultural models" imply the different connotations of the same word for the people belonging to different groups, cultures, systems, and practices (Gee, 2014, p. 81). Therefore, it is imperative to focus upon the cultural and contextual milieu while analyzing the language or semiotic aspect of discourse or text.

Brown and Yule use the terms of reference, presupposition, implicature, inference, and co-text to highlight the significance of context while interpreting a particular text (Yule & Brown, 1986). Reference implies the interrelationship between the words and the entities they denote or refer to. Presupposition, in this context, means the assumption of a writer or denotes what a person who is communicating is implied through his words. Inference refers to the process that a discourse analyst may go through for deducing the intended meaning

in a text or speech. For this, one has to analyze the sentences in connectivity with one another, so that a justifiable meaning may be deduced. Co-text refers to another text having a similar construction of words and that may control the ability of a discourse analyst to deduce meaning from a particular text. Thus, the whole procedure of discourse analysis requires an examination of multiple factors contributing to the generation of meanings from a text (Yule & Brown, 1986).

4. Data Analysis

After a horrible accident, Traynor's life becomes miserable. His inability to move freely and do what he used to do makes him hate himself as well as the people around him. He chooses to isolate himself. From the beginning, the choice of words, hesitation, and expressions shown by Will Traynor demonstrate a stream of meaninglessness, self-doubt and existential crisis. When Louisa Clark tries to do her job by cheering Traynor up, he remains unresponsive and indifferent in his discourse. He says:

and you thought a drive would be good for me?
a breath of fresh air?
What do you usually do?
I don't do anything, Miss Clark. I sit.
and just about exist (*Me Before You*, 2016).

The lines quoted above show that Traynor does not want to improve his life by mitigating his pain and finding solace in some exciting outdoor activity. He has not accepted the life that destiny has thrown at him. He is struggling to be free of a painful life. Not only has he isolated himself from the world due to his quadriplegia, but he also does not welcome people who try to communicate with him and he stays in his zone.

No matter what others try to talk about, he seems to be stuck with the meaninglessness and purposeless of his life. He uses sarcasm to show his abhorrence when Louisa Clark asks him if he would like to use his computer. He replies harshly, shows disgust and says:

Did you find a good quad support group I could join?
'Quads-R-Us? The 'Tin Wheels' club? (*Me Before You*, 2016).

These lines show that Traynor pushes people away when they try to be nice to him. He does that to make Louisa quit and leave him in isolation. It also shows his disinterest in life, he thinks nothing can make his life better; neither a drive nor a little care. Louisa always tries to engage Traynor in conversations but he rarely responds and remains harsh most of the time. She says that maybe they should try to know each other. Traynor appears irritable and annoyed at the offer. For him, life has become meaningless, small talk does not make him feel any better about his life. He declines Louisa Clark's offer by saying:

Could we strike a deal?
Whereby you are very 'unchatty' around me? (*Me Before You*, 2016).

One day when Louisa Clark shows up at work, as usual, Traynor finds her looking up at his old photographs from the past when he was not in the wheelchair and led an adventurous life. His reaction makes it clear that he did not only lose his limbs but with them, he lost

meaning of life. Before the accident, he used to be an adventurous, full of life person who loved exploring the world. But his life changed entirely after the accident. He thinks that people feel sympathetic towards him due to his disability. He feels awful about his own life and thinks everyone around him feels the same. His existential crisis makes him think of life as purposeless. He pronounces:

You were just looking at my photographs.
thinking how awful it must be having lived like that and ended
up like this (*Me Before You*, 2016).

Traynor finds out that his best friend and girlfriend started dating when they visit him, this news shatters him completely and drives him further into the meaningless pit. The existentialist philosophy believes that man keeps searching for meaning in an essentially meaningless world. The feeling is subjective and does not stand on any objective truth, moral, or reality. A man's circumstances are what make him who he is or who he wants to become. He has the freedom to look for meaning. Will's discourse hinges on this idea of subjectivity in search of meaning. When he breaks the photo frames, Louisa tries to fix the frame thinking he accidentally broke them. He says:

Me smashing those was not an accident.
Sorry, alright, I didn't think
you thought you knew best.
Well, I don't want those pictures staring at me,
Every time I'm in bed,
Waiting for someone to bloody get me out again, okay? (*Me Before You*, 2016).

The sarcasm in his tone implies his belief in the subjectivity of struggle; his circumstances make him who he is. The movie is wrapped in existentialist philosophy, even the side scenes, dialogues, setting, and fillers contribute to the idea of existentialism; meaninglessness, search for meaning, and freedom of choice. Traynor and Louisa watch a movie together when Louisa appears restless about the events in the movie, he comments:

they chose to stay. (ibid, Line 424)

The choice of the word 'chose', highlights the significance of choices and freedom to choose in Will Traynor's life.

It is not only Traynor who feels lost in a meaningless world, it is something that can happen in anyone's life at one moment or another. The question of 'being' and struggle to find a purpose in life are of great importance for human beings. Traynor's dialogues highlight the importance of man's struggle to find or create meaning. Every person tries to live life to the fullest, find something he truly loves yet gets tired of living if he cannot find purpose. Traynor says:

Because this is the kind of place people come to
when they got tired of actually living (*Me Before You*, 2016).

The lines quoted above over the universality of struggle to search for meaning in life. It constitutes a big part of a person's life. Humans seek to be 'authentic' in life. The concept of authenticity and inauthenticity comes from Kierkegaard's philosophy, and he states that each individual should try to be authentic. It may feel easier to follow the crowd, but it is

only in living authentically that one can find his/her true purpose and meaning in life. An individual should have the courage to choose his or her subjective truth.

Will Traynor does not hate life in itself, it is just his circumstances that make him reevaluate his philosophy of life. He advocates living life to the fullest and it appears that his disability hinders him to do so, thus changes his attitude towards it. In a conversation with Louisa, he advises her to live to the fullest. He says:

You have to widen your horizons, Clark.

you only get one life.

And it is actually your duty to live it as fully as possible (*Me Before You*, 2016).

These lines are significant because they show the importance of living to the fullest in Traynor's life. He believes that a person has to live in the best way possible.

He loved travelling and exploring new places, Louisa tries to make him revisit the places he truly loved. But that is too much for him to take in, he does not want to be there in a wheelchair. However, his memory is fresh and he wants to remember it forever. The longing in his voice and desire in his eyes reflect how it was the sole purpose of his life. But fate came in the way and changed everything. He lost his purpose when he became paralyzed. He says:

You don't get it, Clark.

I want to be in Paris, as me.

The old me (*Me Before You*, 2016).

Traynor's nurse tells Louisa that he still dreams about running and skiing but when he wakes, he finds himself in a very helpless and meaningless situation. Nathan's concern for and acceptance of Traynor's life reflects the importance of choice. He thinks that he must live only if he truly wants to. Nathan is a side character in the movie but his dialogues contribute to the essence.

Traynor's dialogues are representative of Kierkegaard's philosophy of existentialism, his interpretation of the fundamentally subjective nature of existence, and insistence on the complete freedom of an individual to choose and to become what he resolves to be. He thinks it is 'perfectly reasonable' to end his life because he did not choose to be paralyzed. He hesitantly says that this life is not what he chose, even though he got a chance to love it in Louisa's presence, but he is stuck with his dreams of running and skiing. He does not want to accept what he did not 'choose' for himself. He says:

You never saw me, before

I loved my life.

I've really loved it.

I can't be the kind of man, who just accepts this (*Me Before You*, 2016).

Will Traynor had big dreams and ambitions, but the accident changed his life dramatically. This leads to a great deal of psychological turmoil. The discourse between Traynor and Louisa is full of emotions. His expressions, tone, and pauses in speech are the natural representatives of his determination to exercise his choice. He accepts beauty and love in life but they do not provide him with eternal meaning. He is ready to take life in his own

hands and do what feels right. The breaks and pauses make his dialogues meaningful. He says:

Tonight
being with you
is the most wonderful thing.
You could have ever done for me.
But I need it to end here
No more pain and exhaustion
and waking up every morning...
already wishing it was over.
It's not going to get better than this.
The doctors know it and I know it.
When we get back, I am going to go to Switzerland (*Me Before You*, 2016).

Traynor's existentialism is uncovered by his choices, ability to make those choices, and sticking to them without hesitation. He takes responsibility for his choice by sacrificing the love he attained from Louisa Clark. In his last letter to Clark, he leaves her some money and tells her:

But it should buy you your freedom.
Wear those stripy legs with pride.
Knowing you still have possibilities.
is a luxury, and knowing that I might have given them to you has
eased something, for me.
So, this is it.
You are scored on my heart, Clark.
You were, from the first day you walked in.
Don't think of me too often. I do not want you getting sad.
Just live well.
Just live.
I'll be walking beside you every step of the way (*Me Before You*, 2016).

The emotional letter by Traynor is filled with the existential spirit. It is evident from the way he emphasizes "freedom". Even though he decides to end his life, he advises Clark to live fully, 'just live well, just live' the emphasis on living well discloses his own expectations from life. He did not want to live the rest of his life in a wheelchair.

The next movie under discussion, in comparison to *Me Before You* is *The Theory of Everything*. The movie opens in England, Cambridge back in 1963, with Stephen Hawking and his friend Brian riding on their bicycles. Hawking meets Jane Wilde at a party and falls in love with her. Although Hawking shines at mathematics and physics, his teachers are worried about his lack of a dissertation topic. After attending a lecture on black holes, Hawking makes up his mind to write his thesis on time, space, and the beginning of the universe. But soon he starts losing control over his body movements and one day he falls. He is taken to a hospital where he discovers that he has developed motor neuron disease. Due to which he will be unable to move, breathe properly, swallow and his muscles will gradually start to deteriorate. The doctors tell him that he has two years to live.

Hawking feels isolated and lost due to his illness. He uses humor as a defense mechanism, unlike Will Traynor who uses ironic and sarcastic replies to hide his pain. Hawking isolates himself from his friends and Jane. Jane tries to call him but he hangs up on her. In a later scene, she finds him watching television and tries to talk to him. While watching television, Hawking tries to find the 'probability of happiness'. The choice of words pauses, and hesitation in his tone shows his helplessness. He says:

Well, I'm just trying to work out the
mathematical probability of happiness.
Are you close?
Some integer of zero, but no,
not quite there yet (*The Theory of Everything*, 2014).

His conversation with Jane shows his hesitation to even talk about his disease. He knows that his muscles will gradually deteriorate and he would not be able to move voluntarily. He pushes Jane away and asks her to leave.

Stephen.
You just missed him,
he was here earlier.
Don't do this.
Go.
Croquet.
Play a game with me.
Go (*The Theory of Everything*, 2014).

Jane Wilde tries to talk him out of it, but Hawking keeps changing the subject and does not talk about his disease. His dialogues show desperation about his situation, but he seems to have found meaning in the most hopeless of times. The existentialist stream of man's search for meaning exists in his discourse. Despite his physical condition, he wants to work because it is the most important thing in his life. He asks Jane to leave and tells her that she does not know what is going to happen in the future. He says:

Will you just go?
I have two years to live.
I need to work (*The Theory of Everything*, 2014).

Hawking's father tries to tell Jane that it is going to be very difficult for her when she declares love for Hawking and is ready to 'fight the illness' with him. She remains determined to go against the odds and marries him. Hawking starts losing control over his legs and uses a walking stick. Despite his deteriorating muscles, Hawking writes his thesis on time-space singularity. His professors approve of his work and congratulate him. When one of his professors asks him, what does he want to do next he says:

Prove it.
To prove with a single equation, that time has a beginning.
The one simple, elegant equation
to explain everything (*The Theory of Everything*, 2014).

These lines are significant because of Hawking's approach towards life, unlike Traynor who lost meaning in life after meeting an accident. Hawking finds meaning in his work and remains determined to continue no matter how hard it seems. Hawking loses control of his legs completely. He and Jane have two kids together.

Jane's mother asks her to join the church choir where she meets a handsome young man called Jonathan. He is a side character in the movie but he contributes to the existential theme of the movie. The movie shows the positive side of finding meaning in life despite being in the most difficult situations. Jonathan tells Jane and Hawking that he lost his wife a year ago, he gets lonely when he is in the empty room but he has found 'salvation' in music. He says:

I do get quite lonely.
The... tyranny of the empty room and all that.
But music is my salvation.
Teaching and playing (*The Theory of Everything*, 2014).

Jonathan offers help and says that since he does not have kids of his own, nor any commitments, he will probably find a purpose in life. His discourse is important because it hints at the essential aspect of existentialism- finding a purpose or meaning in a meaningless world. He says:

I believe I might find
a purpose that would...
help alleviate my own, situation (*The Theory of Everything*, 2014).

Hawking's health worsens over time and he goes into a coma. Doctors tell Jane that there is only one way of getting him off the ventilator, but after that procedure, he will never speak again. For Jane, Hawking's life is the most important thing and she agrees for the trichotomy.

Hawking's determination to live and work keeps him going. He wants to write a book about time, nature of time, and the possibility of getting back in time. A therapist arrives to help him communicate with the help of a spelling board.

Hawking writes his book called *A Brief History of Time*, in which he explains the big bang and black holes (Hawking, 1992). He finds meaning in explaining the universe and defies every expectation. Doctors gave him two years to live but he does not want fate to take on. He takes responsibility for his life and continues to live. The final speech by Hawking is what defines his life and its meaning despite the miserable condition. He says:

There ought to be something very special
about the boundary conditions of the universe.
And what can be more special
than that there is no boundary...
And there should be no boundary to human endeavor.
We are all different.
However bad life may seem, there is always something
you can do and succeed at.
While there is life, there is hope (*The Theory of Everything*, 2014).

His existential philosophy leads him to believe in wide horizons of the universe, and he believes that there should be no boundaries to human efforts.

- **Traynor vs. Hawking: Two Existentialist Crossroads**

The protagonists of the selected movies go through life-changing experiences. In the case of Will Traynor, it is the development of quadriplegia as a result of a road accident, while Stephen Hawking suffers from motor neuron disease that makes him lose control of his muscles. Both of them experience existential crises and they reevaluate their experiences, the meaning of life, and the purpose of being. Will Traynor loved his life before the accident, he lived an adventurous life, travelled around and had found meaning in exploring the world. Nothing could stop him from living his life to the fullest. But his life took an unexpected turn when he met an accident. The accident left him paralyzed from the neck down and with his body's movement, he lost the meaning of life and exercised his freedom of choice and decided to end the life he did not choose for himself. On the other hand, Stephen Hawking defies all expectations, finds the meaning of life in science, his role as a physicist, and passion to find an equation that would be the theory of everything keep him going. Although Hawking and Traynor face somehow similar physical problems, it is their dealing with existential crises that make them different from each other.

5. Conclusion

Discourse analysis helps deduce meaning and understand patterns of language from a particular angle. In the same pattern, the current study has brought about the discourse analysis of the existential spirit presented by the protagonists in the selected films. In *Me Before You* Will Traynor refuses to use determination to keep living the rest of his wheelchair-bound life, while in *The Theory of Everything* Stephen Hawking defies all expectations, dedicates himself to the study of cosmology. Traynor exercises his 'free will' to contemplate and decide what to do with his life. Similarly, Hawking tries to create meaning when mired in the life-changing incident. Both protagonists propagate the existentialist view of "freedom and responsibility" and represent Kierkegaard's concept of existential philosophy where he insists on the freedom of an individual to 'choose' and to 'become' what he wills. The protagonists of both movies face existential crises after encountering tragic situations in life. The physical disabilities lead to a crisis that inhibits purposeful existence, therefore forcing them to reevaluate life, its purpose, and all that they had ever known. But their approaches towards life, ways to find meaning and purpose set a major contrast between their personalities as discussed in the analysis.

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