



RESEARCH PAPER

Sartrean Existentialist Analysis of the Selected Characters of the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to find out the existential elements in the Selected Characters of *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer. Further, the study analyzes the existential themes of freedom, choices, and bad faith as presented by the existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. The Selected characters are Friar, The Summoner, The Wife of Bath, and The Knight. Chaucer's *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* though written in the fourteenth century, has universal appeal. The themes, dilemmas, and conflicts presented through the fourteenth-century characters are for all ages. These characters have traces of being existential characters. Existentialism as a theory or philosophy emphasizes the importance of freedom and choices made by man. Chaucer's character which comprises of different classes, professions, and gender assert their sense of freedom in many ways and hence falls either into the category of being-in-itself or being-for-itself. Existentialism is used as a methodological framework for the textual analysis of the Prologue.

**KEYWORDS** Alienation, Being-For-Itself, Being-In-Itself, Existential, Freedom, Philosophy, Sartre

Introduction

Present study focuses on the existentialist elements in the selected characters of *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*. More specifically, the research throws light on Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist aspects of choices, actions, decisions, bad faith, cursed freedom, responsibility, and the concept of being in the way of finding true meaning in the hollow and disordered world. Chaucer's universal Characters are much like the characters that one finds in modern and post-modern literature. The characters Selected for analysis are The Friar, The Summoner, The Wife of Bath, and The Knight. There are twenty-nine characters in total in *The General Prologue* but the research mainly focuses on the four characters firstly, because these characters are the most striking as well as the most prominent among other characters as they represent the important social classes of Chaucer's society secondly, to delimit the research as it will be difficult to analyze all the characters in the specific word limit.

In the world of Chaucer, the disruption and destruction of the Hundred Year's War, the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 and the Black Death of 1348, 1361, and 1369 concluded in doubt and uncertainty among people, and their attitudes, actions depict their doubt and confusion of existence in the world. As Ellis asserts "The result of the plague upon ecclesiastical discipline was at first a relaxation of Church rules. Priests were so scarce that deacons were permitted to give Holy Communion, and faith supplied the place of Extreme Unction" (110). Another critic Gasquet asserts that about twenty-five thousands of the clerical people were affected due to this plague and approximately one person in a hundred was related to the church in the total population, the expiry rate in the country would have been about 2,500,000, which is almost akin to the population that was in the ending of the rule of Edward III. (237-238). In this way, one can assert that Chaucer's characters are the perfect example of fourteenth-century people who suffered from the existential crises of the post-war era.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement and is primarily associated with the concerns of life's meaning and existence as Gray defines it as "a philosophical trend which stresses the importance of existence" (p. 112). Man's life is governed by the choices and decisions, he has taken for himself. Existentialism as a philosophy proposes that man, himself is the creator of his meaningful existence and is free to do whatever he wants to do with his freedom in this strange universe. Man has complete freedom to make his choice, as the study investigates Chaucer's selected characters, and at the same time, he is responsible for all his doings. This philosophy has its roots in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, but was popularized during the mid-twentieth century after the two terrible world wars. Although it was not an established literary movement, its influence can be recognized in the works of different writers, thinkers, and philosophers in the world. Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck, the famous American writers are influenced by existentialist philosophy to name a few. As it generally falls into the genre of philosophy, there are many doctrines of existentialist philosophy, and each philosopher related to these doctrines has his way of defining it, but all agree that the main theme in existentialism is man's freedom of choice. This study primarily focuses on the existentialist ideas presented by Sartre. Sartre mainly talks about the free will of man in creating his life and according to him only he is responsible for his good or bad choices. Sartre in *Existentialism and Humanism* Existentialism, is a discipline that does consider human life possible; a discipline also, "which affirms that every truth and every action implies both an environment and a human subjectivity" (p. 24). The present study analyzes his concepts of freedom, Being, and choices through the characters of Chaucer.

Chaucer's *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* is a masterpiece in English Literature. Blake who is not only a poet but also an engraver and a painter painted the pictures of the Canterbury pilgrims. He considers Chaucer the greatest observer of mankind who records and eternalizes every era and its acts, and he does so as a great master, as a "father, and superior...sometimes with severity, oftener with joke and sport" (qtd in Bloom,130). In painting characters, Chaucer is viewed next to Shakespeare. As Kittredge rightly says "Next to Shakespeare Chaucer is the greatest delineator of character in our literature." (29). Chaucer's characters have universal appeal as his characters are recognizable for six centuries.

This paper analyses selected characters in *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* from an existentialist perspective of Sartre. Chaucer's poem not only represents the distant past but also the well-acquainted present. The world of Chaucer's characters is a blend of temporal and sacred notions. All his characters including ecclesiastical or professional are existential. The present study investigates how Chaucer's foreign world is not a foreign world rather it is also hollow in terms of morality like the modern world. Chaucer's out-of-date characters are existential and they practice their free will to make their existence meaningful. The study aims to reveal that many of Chaucer's classical characters are representative of Sartre's concept of freedom and being.

## Literature Review

The present study analyzes the existentialist elements in the Prologue's four characters. The already existing body of literature is presented in this section about the theory as well as about the author and the said work. Existentialism is a broad school of thought or a theory. It emerged as a theory or philosophy after the destruction of two world wars. It has many definitions and explanations. Roberts in his book *Existentialism and Religious Belief* declares that existentialism generally considers man as ambiguous and this ambiguity has a deep relation with freedom. Freedom states that we are responsible for choosing whatever we are. And what we will be? (74). He further elaborates in his book that although man is free this freedom brings with it a sense of guilt, regret, and responsibility for one's action. There is no guidebook to tell a person how to use this freedom. He can use

this freedom to develop himself according to his wishes. With this complete sense of freedom, he has to battle with his inner dilemmas and conflicts (8).

There are many tenets of existentialism and they all define and present existentialism in their style but, all agree on the freedom of mankind. Swain is of the view that "Man's autonomy, the assertion of his subjective self, his flouting of the reason and rationality, his denial of traditional values, institution, and philosophy, his exercise of will and freedom, and his experience of the absurdity and the nothingness of the life" (qtd. in Bhatnagar & Rajeshwar 164). These are the crucial points of existentialism as a theory and as a philosophy. These are also the primary themes represented by the existentialist writers.

Heiney describes in his book that existentialists believe that all comprehensive Laws are subjective, these laws and ideologies are produced by man for their benefits and if man wants to change them, he can change them according to his will. Sartre asserts, that like laws and principles human nature can also be changed. Human nature is considered static or unchangeable just because human beings have agreed upon it, but they can reject the traditional characteristics and attributes and agree upon some other attributes. Sartre is the proponent of atheist existentialism and according to his philosophy, the concept of God is abstract and created by man for his convenience. Secondly, his philosophy is pessimistic as there is no optimistic hope outside and lastly, his philosophy is humanistic and liberal as human nature can be transformed for the betterment (394). Killinger in his book concludes all forms of existentialism in three statements: first, that the central point of all existentialist theories is the individual second, every individual faces the problem of being an individual or a fragment of a gathering. And third, man has two choices, good or bad and he is free to choose between these choices (6-11).

Zanoni in her dissertation titled *Divine Order and human freedom in Chaucer's Poetry and Philosophical Tradition* discusses the role of freedom and freewill in three different works of Chaucer, these works are Knight's Tale, Troilus, and Nun's Priest's Tales. She discusses that Characters in these works assert their freedom in different ways.

Different researchers have searched about the secular nature of Chaucer's characters. Mohammed and Raji in their article *Chaucer's Religious Skepticism* assert that the focal point of Chaucer's literary works is religious skepticism. Religious skepticism is formed because of doubt and uncertainty produced by the maddening social and political disturbances of the fourteenth century. The atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty is evident in Chaucer's era where people believed more in astrology, mythology, and fortune than in Divine Power. Chaucer himself inquiries the religious conventions in his works as paganism was still prevalent in the fourteenth century. Moreover, the plague, the materialism of the church, and the bleakness of life contributed to skepticism. Chaucer shows his confusion and doubt of his mind by presenting stars and fortune as the controller of man's life.

Further, Ellis narrates that the effects of the Black Death can be seen in the church more than in any other field of life. The clergy extremely suffered the effects of the Black Death. The preachers and curates of the country perished nobly and it became difficult for the preachers of religion to compensate the lack of priests. "In the diocese of Norwich alone, more than eight hundred parishes lost their pastors twice within one year. Of course, the monasteries became almost depopulated." (109-110)

According to Cowley secularism is one of the obvious themes of Chaucer's works like *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*. His verse signifies secular features although that it was occasionally told by a Christian narrator. *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales* are secular in their subject matter. Secular themes are meticulously associated with humanism. Humanism is a secular philosophy; it usually rejects religion. Sometimes it agrees with religion when the equality of mankind is concerned. In humanism, to be a moral person does not denote to be a religious person. Caspari thinks that medieval humanism motivates to achieve the fulfillment of human life while Christian religion

encourages obscurity. "The humanists advocated a rational and largely secular education based on the study of Greek and Roman classics, and from it, they expected great benefits to the individual and society" (p.1). Similarly, Wakelin in his book *Humanism, Reading, and English Literature:1430-1530* holds that humanism was considered to come from the Renaissance and there is an extensive debate of whether the secular aspects of the works of Chaucer and his contemporaries fall into the category of humanism or not.

This work is the most anthologized work of English literature, many authors and researchers have dealt with different aspects of this work. This research will bridge the gap in the sense that it will look into the fourteenth-century work in the light of twentieth-century philosophy.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

The research is qualitative, existentialist philosophy is used as a method for analyzing the text. Specifically, the research focuses on the chief elements of Sartre's existentialism as methodological tools. Sartre's existential notions have been employed as an apparatus to investigate how Chaucer's travelers assert Sartre's free will and autonomy. Sartre himself was an atheist and many of Chaucer's Pilgrim's attitudes and actions depict that they question the existence and authority of God. Sartre advocates that as there is no Governing power in the world, consequently, it is on man to utilize his freedom and make meaningful choices in the hostile universe. But this sheer freedom produces responsibility as well and whatever one chooses using this freedom chooses for whole humanity. Sartre in *Existentialism and Humanism* propounds that if for instance I have decided to marry and have kids though it is related to my state of affairs and it is my desire I am choosing the practice of monogamy for entire humanity. "I am thus responsible for myself and for all men and, an existing a certain image of man as I would have him to be" (p. 30)

Sartre has presented two ways of being, being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Being-in-itself is objects that have complete essence like a table, pen, or chair that are unconscious of their existence. While being-for-itself are beings that have no fixed or stable essence and are aware of their freedom to choose. As Sartre depicts 'Being-for-itself' is the being of consciousness and Sartre describes it as a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself.'(qt in Wicks41) In contrast, 'being-in-itself' (to which Sartre often refers shorter handily as the 'in-itself') refers to the being of objects or the world of 'things.' Although certain things cannot be changed about a man as the time and date of his birth are fixed and he has no role in deciding when or where he will be born yet, he is a free individual to choose the course of his life. So, in this regard, one can see that human beings fall into the category of being for themselves if they are aware of their freedom. He further denotes a being that is being for others presented in his play *No Exit*. The concept asserts that the perception of "other" makes one an object which robs one's freedom. Sartre has also given the concept of "bad faith" which he describes as Bad faith that can involve saying oneself, that one is a grocer, a tailor," or a courageous person," etc "when it is difficult to acknowledge the possibility of changing professions, acting cowardly, losing one's temper, or acting with embarrassing ignorance." (qt in Wicks 41) Chaucer's prologue indicates that his characters signify complete freedom by indulging themselves in hedonistic activities and avoiding their religious duties. These aspects serve as touchstones through which the characters in *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* are examined to seek an answer to the research question i-e whether or not the strains of Santerian existentialism present therein. A close textual analysis as well as the cross references of the secondary sources on the work concerned are implemented.

### **Results and Discussion**

This section analyzes some of Chaucer's most anthologized characters through the lens of Santerian Existentialism. In *The General Prologue*, there are almost twenty-nine pilgrims, who are traveling towards the shrine of Thomas a Becket but the present research

focuses on the four selected pilgrims these Pilgrims are the Friar, the Summoner, The Knight, and the Wife of Bath. All the characters with their drapes, actions, and inclinations prove that they are modern existential characters.

Chaucer's first selected existentialist character that shows the profanity of the church in the medieval era is Friar. Chaucer the great painter of life satirizes the character of The Friar in *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*. In Medieval times Friars were wanderers connected to church who earned their living by begging in different areas. The Friars were supposed to be paupers but, this Friar embodies lusty medieval Friars as he is presented as a womanizer. All the time he is concerned with money and women as can be seen in the following lines from the Prologue: "He hadde maad ful many a marriage /Of yonge wommen at his own cost. /Unto his ordre he was a noble post." (Chaucer, 2011 line,212-214)

Chaucer reveals this Friar has arranged marriages of many girls at his own expense, but this kind gesture is not to be confused with his pious nature as he paid the price for taking away their virginity. Although, his profession is of a religious man his corrupt nature is evident here. He constantly oscillates between duty and desire and chooses desire over duty like a true existentialist character. Chaucer ironically calls him a noble figure of his post. This Friar is very popular among the Franklins and wealthy ladies of his town as he is involved in the deadly sins of avarice and lust. He is a limiter but he freely chooses as an existentialist to enjoy his authority to fulfill his prohibited desires. He is assigned the authority of hearing the confessions of sinners by the church but as an opportunist, he demands a heavy amount of money from people for the compensation of their sins. Chaucer's Friar is a professional swindler as he swindles rich as well as penniless people. His behavior inscribes that he is an existentialist figure who is free to make his own rules and regulations for his life. He seems to freely reject the assignments assigned to him by the church. Moreover, his insatiable sexual desires show his existential inclinations in exercising his freedom. Sartre has given the notion of being-for-other which indicates that the gaze of others objectifies a person and snatches his freedom of being himself. In the case of this friar he castoffs the gaze of others which requires from him certain virtuous duties of a churchman rather he freely asserts his individuality by following his own secular beliefs. Rejection of religion is not a big deal for this Friar just like atheist existentialist modern characters. As he is a corrupt Friar he thinks the guilt-stricken people must pay him for seeking repentance. He is using religion as a tool for doing his business. Chaucer further asserts: "His type was ay fared ful of knyves/And pynnes, for to yeven faire wyves" (Chaucer, 2011 lines,233-234). Chaucer denotes that he knows all the tricks of wooing young innocent girls, and he keeps pins and knives with him to impress them. As Chaucer says: "He knew the tavernas well in every town/And feverish more hostile and tappestere/Bet than a lazar or a beggestere; (Chaucer 2011, lines 240-242).

As a free existential individual, he asserts his personality by making acquaintances with the elite people of the town and avoiding the poor penniless people. He seems serviceable and sociable but in reality, he is a hypocrite. He does not even allow any person to beg in his area and he knows every bar girl. Chaucer says that he is such a master of using flattering words that he can even grab money from a poor widow. As an existential being, he has chosen being-for-itself for himself rather than being-in-itself.

Friar tells the tale about the evil nature of the Summoner as a result Summoner also tells a tale about the friar which depicts the amoral nature of the friar. The poem *The Canterbury Tales* further throws light on the characters of the prologue. The character's storytelling on their way to the shrine is a literary technique used by Chaucer to further reveal the nature and behaviors of his characters. The Summoner offends the friar by saying that the friars will be received as chief guests in hell as there is a special place booked for them which is the arse of the devil. In Summoner's tale, a friar visits a sick man and attempts to manipulate him. He demands money from him for his recovery, but, the old man insults

him severely then the friar shows him his anger. This shows the true greedy character of this friar, like this friar, many beggars can be seen begging in the name of God for emotionally blackmailing people. One can see that in the present age, many fake pirs or pundits fraud people by claiming that they are capable of fulfilling people's needs.

Another significant existentialist character is the character of the Summoner. A Summoner is usually a minor official of the medieval church and his job is to summon people in the court for their religious sins, like infidelity or heresy, the punishment for which can be expulsion from the ecclesiastical church. His disgusting physical appearance is very much revealing of his inner erotic self. As Chaucer asserts:

A sooner was ther with us in that place,  
That had a fyr-reed cherubin face,  
For saucefleem, he was, with even more.

As hoot he was and lecherous as a spare, (Chaucer 2011, line 625-628)

Chaucer says that his hideous red face is like that of a cherub, a cherub here symbolizes a fallen angel. Chaucer further describes his face as full of pimples, he is so ugly even children are scared of his appearance. Chaucer has ironically presented him as hideous to show his hideous inner self. He eats onions, garlic, and leeks to enhance his sexual desires, moreover, his sensuous nature is compared to a sparrow. He speaks in Latin when he is drunk, if anyone challenges his hollow knowledge, he starts speaking in Latin to show that he is an educated person.

This hedonist character is so obsessed with his sense of freedom that he rejects the sacred duty of the church official and enjoys his life on his terms; it seems that he is the representative of atheist existentialism. As an atheist existentialist, he overthrows the fixed role of being-in-itself, which in his case is the role of a church official, and asserts his freedom in becoming the being-for-it. It seems that this being is only concerned with his self as one can observe in these lines:

He wolde suffre for a quart of wyn  
A good felawe to have his concubyn  
A twelf month, and excuse hym atte fulle;

Ful prively a fynch eek koude he pulle (Chaucer 2011, line 651-654).

This free being is presented by Chaucer as a pimp, he is so profane that he can even pimp his mistress for twelve months in exchange for a little wine. His addiction to freedom has made him an addict of corruption, he is involved in sexual affairs with numerous women. His extreme sense of freedom in the hostile world has made him a spiritually hollow person. His ugly nature and appearance truly make him the devil's disciple working within the church as he even teaches people not to be afraid of archdeacon.

The encounter between Summoner and Friar discloses the existential desires of these characters through their particular tales against each other. The Summoner is a cheat, who accuses innocent people of sins they are not guilty of. People give an inducement to him so that they do not have to go to church court for the false accusations. In Friar's tale, one day a Summoner was on his way to a village to accuse a widow of a crime she had not committed. He met a person on his way whom he assumed to be a yeoman but who was a devil in reality. The person told him that he was just like the Summoner. Then the Summoner went his way towards the widow's house and accused her of infidelity towards her husband and demanded money and a frying pan as an atonement. The innocent widow cursed him

for suspecting her for the false crime and then the fiend took the Summoner's body and soul to hell which was his actual residing place.

Chaucer's most famous female character Wife of Bath shows that he is an existentialist who is in favor of equality of men and women. Chaucer's wife of Bath is an independent, headstrong rebellious woman asserting her freedom in the patriarchal medieval society. Her matriarchal personality indicates that she is the true representative of feminist existentialism. In the Middle Ages, women were supposed to be submissive or inferior to men in every matter of life. The women who were not subservient or dutiful were thought to be witches or evil women. On the other hand, women who were dependent on men were considered angels and often associated with the Virgin Mary. They had no right over their assets. A wife was usually considered a legally incompetent adult, whenever there was a matter of lawful status of a woman (Goldberg).

In medieval times women were treated as men's personal property, not only the society is patriarchal, but the church was also patriarchal and dominated by men. According to Knapp, this wife is a "commentator", who asserts the need for freedom, rather than a "liberated woman" herself (qt in Connie Y., et al 188). Chaucer ironically tells in the prologue about Wife of Baths that during the offertory in the church, she gives alms and no woman can compete with her in giving alms which indicates that she is an independent woman though she does so just for the sake of boasting about her money. If any woman tries to compete with her, she becomes offended and forgets about pity and charity. Her giving favors in the form of charity shows her material power and indicates that she has no emotional attachment to church and religion, she is doing everything for worldly pleasures. Chaucer says she is the conspicuous woman of her parish and she has a high social status. The scarf she wears on Sunday prayers in church is worth ten pounds which shows she is a wealthy woman. This description shows that she rebels against the conventional values-giving systems and creates her reality like a true existentialist. As a being -for for-itself, she knows very well how to survive in the misogynist society of the middle ages. She is a businesswoman who even uses the church for her business purposes just like the Summoner and Friar. Her brave speeches, red face, sybaritic figure, new shoes, gaps in her teeth, large hips, elegant clothes, and weighty kerchief reveal her intricate character. According to Blamires, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, the Wife of Bat is a "survivor of a lifetime in the sex war..." and she serves as a role model for younger people who she believes will learn under her guidance how to use men as she considers they have used her (159). Chaucer explains: "She was a worthy womman al hir lyve:/Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve,/Withouten oother compaignye in youthe," --(Chaucer 2011, line461-463)

The prologue explains her as a notorious woman for having five husbands and she is on a pilgrimage to find the sixth one. Besides, these spouses, this fair sex has other young lovers who enjoy her company just like modern women who are involved in hook-up culture. Chaucer ironically says that she is a respected woman throughout her life. She has performed many pilgrimages and visited many times Jerusalem, but these pilgrimages serve as an enjoyable trip for her. Although, she is not a religious person she has visited many popular shrines in Rome to show pomp and show her lifestyle. She is a wealthy and powerful woman who only wants sex, but she uses sex as a tool for extracting money from her rich companions. Her dress and her visits to shrines exhibit that she is a well-off woman. Financial independence is the source of her freedom to choose what she desires. She is open-minded and a freedom fighter who always speaks her mind. She bluntly declares about her sexuality and her seductive nature in an era where virginity is valued the most. She is a she-tigress who preserves her position and autonomy in a male-sexist society.

Wife of Bath has practically all the attributes of Sartre's atheist existentialism as she also displays her cynical nature by enquiring about the fundamentals of the bible and by comparing her life with the lives of pious saints. This daring medieval woman advocates the

equality of man and woman. DE Beauvoir who was an existentialist feminist and companion of Sartre is of the view that "what is socially constructed can be socially (and politically) dismantled and the oppression of women that it fosters can thereby be relieved". (qtd, in Flynn 100). Her tale designates that she is not satisfied with the equality with men rather she wants the dominance of women over men and rejects the concept of being for others. Medieval people wanted to see women as mere goods and objects and, in this way, they lost their freedom and became being-in-itself with fixed identity. Wife of Bath represents Sartre's concept of being for itself, as she is a free being.

The last existentialist character the research is going to focus on is the character of Chaucer's Knight. In contrast to the worldly existentialist characters that the study discussed, there is a worthy Knight among the travelers whom Chaucer presented first in the prologue. Knight is a medieval soldier and is highest in the social hierarchy of that era. This medieval knight has many respectable abilities as he is courageous and daring, rather he is the paragon of chivalric code. He loves truth, gallantry, humility, integrity, and gentility as Chaucer tells us:

A knyght ther was, and that a worthy man,

That fro the tyme that he first bigan

To riden out, he loved chivalrie,

Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie (Chaucer 2011, line 43-46).

He has never spoken any bad word and is never unkind to anyone as Chaucer tells us: He never yet no vileynye ne sayde/ In al his lyf unto no maner wight. / He was a verray, parfit gentil knight (p.92). He is a true Christian as he cares for the feelings of others, besides being a prodigious warrior and guardian of his homeland and faith. He is clothed in his battle clothes because he is going straight from the battlefield to the pilgrimage. This shows his dedication to his country and his religion. Chaucer further tells us that he has participated in and won many mortal battles and is always praised for his valor as a tiger. He possessed superhuman qualities and he represented the medieval concept of heroism. He is serving untiringly his country and faith.

Sartre believes that man has the freedom to choose whatever course he wants to choose, and whatever he chooses he chooses it for the whole of humankind because man is ultimately responsible not only for his deeds but, also for the deeds of others. This knight, who signifies the conventional concept of knighthood, chooses the conventional morals and values of bravery, truth, and valor for the entire humanity. He proposes the traditional notion of virtue. If one analyses it from Sartre's point of view this Knight is being-in-itself because by submitting to societal or spiritual rules, he has forgone his true freedom and he is suffering from what Sartre calls Bad faith. Religion constrains the free will of a person and this knight always fights in the name of religion hence he has lost his freedom. He is a being-in-itself because he is a static being and has a fixed identity of a knight. But, according to Sartre's view of freedom man creates himself, this Knight has created himself as a worthy person, and for him, that is his freedom. Existentialist philosophy as a whole focuses on making choices to give meaning to one's existence. His Knight has given meaning to his life by adhering to the conventions of society.

## **Conclusion**

The present research attempts to analyze the pilgrims of *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* through an existentialist perspective. Chaucer's pilgrims signify different sects and professions of his era and all the pilgrims indicate existentialism in some way or



other. The present study presents that they are the incarnation of Sartre's existentialism. Existentialism deals with the freedom of man. In this regard, man is totally a free being and he can choose the course of his life easily without any interference of traditions and creed. Freedom of choice is the core of existentialist philosophy as presented through the characters of Friar, Summoner, Wife of Bath, and Knight. They suffered a lot because of their callous attitude toward the miseries of life and created their ultimate reality for living. Their disordered souls were unable to recognize their God. Integrity, honesty, devotion, and morality were irrational and abstract words for them which had no meaning for them as denoted by Friar, Summoner, and wife of Bath while there are some good people also like the knight who have used his freedom for choosing morality and religion.

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