

An Existential Reading of Female subjectivity in sister Jesme's *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun*

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Abstract- This article offers a Sartrean existentialist reading of *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun* by Sister Jesme, examining the emergence of female subjectivity within the restrictive structures of Catholic monastic life in Kerala. Drawing exclusively on Jean-Paul Sartre's concepts of consciousness, freedom, choice, responsibility, bad faith, and authenticity, the study traces Jesme's transformation from institutional obedience to existential self-assertion. The article argues that Jesme's autobiography records a movement from bad faith—where freedom is denied under the guise of religious duty—toward authentic existence, where the subject assumes responsibility for defining her own being. Life-writing is thus read as an existential act through which the narrator affirms her freedom by choosing herself against an oppressive institutional order. The study demonstrates that even within rigid religious structures, Sartrean freedom persists as an inescapable condition, revealing female subjectivity as a project forged through choice, negation, and conscious refusal.

Keywords: Sartrean Existentialism; Freedom; Bad Faith; Authenticity; Female Subjectivity; Life Writing; Catholic Monasticism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Existentialism, as articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre, foregrounds freedom as the defining condition of human existence. According to Sartre, human beings are not born with a fixed essence; rather, they continuously define themselves through choices made within concrete situations (Existentialism and Humanism). Institutions may impose roles, identities, and expectations, but they cannot annul freedom itself. As Sartre famously asserts, "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (Existentialism and Humanism 29). It is within this philosophical

framework that this work of Sister Jesme can be read as a powerful existential narrative.

This article examines how Sister Jesme's life within a Catholic convent becomes a site of existential conflict, where institutional obedience confronts individual consciousness. The study focuses on how Jesme's subjectivity is shaped, constrained, and ultimately reclaimed through acts of choice. By reading the memoir strictly through Sartre's theory of freedom, bad faith, and authenticity, the article argues that Jesme's withdrawal from religious life and her decision to narrate her experience constitute existential acts through which she assumes responsibility for her own being (Jesme).

II. SARTREAN EXISTENTIALISM AND SUBJECTIVITY

For Sartre, consciousness is intentional and always oriented toward the world. The human subject exists as *being-for-itself* (*pour-soi*), defined not by what it is, but by what it is not yet (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*). Subjectivity, therefore, is not a static identity but an ongoing project shaped by choice. Even in situations of extreme constraint, the subject remains free because it must still choose how to respond (Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*).

Sartre's concept of bad faith is central to understanding institutional life. Bad faith occurs when individuals deny their freedom by attributing their actions entirely to external authorities, social roles, or divine commands. As Sartre explains, "Bad faith is a lie to oneself within the unity of a single consciousness" (*Being and Nothingness* 89). Religious institutions, by emphasizing obedience and submission, often encourage such denial of responsibility. Yet, Sartre

insists that obedience itself is a choice and therefore an expression of freedom (*Existentialism and Humanism*). In this sense, subjectivity is formed not through compliance but through the recognition of freedom and responsibility. Authentic existence begins when the individual acknowledges that no external authority can absolve her of the burden of choice (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*).

III. MONASTIC LIFE AND THE PRODUCTION OF BAD FAITH

In *Amen*, Sister Jesme describes convent life as governed by rigid rules, surveillance, and unquestioned obedience. Daily routines, bodily discipline, regulated speech, and enforced silence structure every aspect of existence, encouraging nuns to perceive themselves as instruments of divine will rather than autonomous subjects (Jesme).

From a Sartrean perspective, this environment fosters bad faith. By framing obedience as sacred duty, the institution offers nuns a means of escaping responsibility for their own actions. Jesme initially participates in this mode of existence, accepting suffering, silence, and submission as divinely ordained rather than consciously chosen (Jesme). Reflecting on the limits of this endurance, she writes, “I would have continued within the religious enclosure till my last breath if only they had not forced the psychiatric treatment upon me” (Jesme 170).

However, Sartre argues that such surrender does not eliminate freedom; it conceals it (*Being and Nothingness*). Jesme’s growing discomfort, doubt, and inner conflict reveal the instability of bad faith, as her consciousness begins to recognize the discrepancy between institutional demands and her lived experience (Jesme).

IV. CONSCIOUSNESS, CONFLICT AND EXISTENTIAL AWAKENING

As Jesme becomes increasingly aware of hypocrisy, injustice, and psychological coercion within the convent, her consciousness undergoes a process of negation. Sartre emphasizes that consciousness defines itself by negating what it is not (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*). Jesme’s questioning of authority, her refusal to internalize imposed meanings, and her resistance to being pathologized mark critical

moments in this process (Jesme). Articulating the ethical inversion at the heart of the institution, Jesme observes that “obedience was valued more than truth, silence more than justice” (Jesme 92).

Institutional responses to her dissent—misinterpretation, isolation, and coercion—intensify her awareness of freedom rather than extinguish it. Sartre maintains that oppression does not destroy freedom; it reveals it by forcing the subject to confront responsibility for her choices (*Existentialism and Humanism*). Jesme’s realization that she is being compelled to live a life she no longer chooses forces her to confront her responsibility for remaining within the institution (Jesme).

Her decision to leave the convent is thus not an impulsive rebellion but an existential choice. By choosing to walk away, Jesme assumes responsibility for defining her own existence, accepting the uncertainty and consequences that accompany freedom (*Existentialism and Humanism*).

V. LIFE WRITING AS AN EXISTENTIAL ACT

Sartre views action as the means through which freedom becomes real (*Existentialism and Humanism*). Writing, in this sense, is not merely a record of experience but an act that affirms subjectivity. Jesme’s decision to narrate her life in *Amen* constitutes a conscious act through which she claims authorship over her own being (Jesme).

By writing her autobiography, Jesme refuses the identity imposed upon her by the Church and asserts herself as a self-defining subject. The memoir transforms lived suffering into meaning through reflection, making visible the choices that shaped her existence. This act of narration exemplifies Sartre’s claim that human beings are responsible not only for what they do, but for what they make of what has been done to them (*Existentialism and Humanism*).

VI. AUTHENTICITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Authenticity, in Sartrean terms, requires acknowledging freedom without illusion. Jesme’s journey illustrates this movement toward authenticity. She no longer attributes her suffering solely to divine will or institutional necessity but recognizes her own role in sustaining or rejecting those conditions (Jesme). Even her earlier acts of devotion can be understood as choices made in freedom. Sartre insists that surrender

does not negate freedom; it expresses it (*Being and Nothingness*). What changes over time is Jesme's awareness of this freedom. Her eventual refusal to continue in religious life reflects an authentic assumption of responsibility for her existence (*Existentialism and Humanism*).

VII.CONCLUSION

This article has examined *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun* through a strictly Sartrean existentialist framework, demonstrating how female subjectivity emerges through consciousness, choice, and responsibility. Sister Jesme's narrative reveals how institutional religion encourages bad faith by offering obedience as an escape from freedom (Jesme). Yet, her experience also confirms Sartre's central claim that freedom is inescapable (*Existentialism and Humanism*).

Jesme's withdrawal from monastic life and her act of life-writing represent existential affirmations through which she defines herself against imposed identities. As Sartre reminds us, "To choose oneself is to affirm the value of what one chooses" (*Existentialism and Humanism* 38). Her memoir thus illustrates that subjectivity is not erased by oppression but is forged through the very struggle to confront and assume freedom.

REFERENCE

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