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What Dictates the Will? Writing Suffering in Indra Bahadur Rai's Selected Short Fiction

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Abstract

Indra Bahadur Rai (1927-2018) presents the precariousness of human existence in his short fiction. Writing from the hills of Darjeeling, India, he sees the play of human existence through a unique lens as he delves deep into the underlying sphere of free will. He explores the factors that limit and dictate human choices in the large universe of being. This article reads Rai's two popular short stories: "Tyasari Bacheko Chha Tyasari Nai" [This is How He has Lived on] from his collection of stories in *Kathastha* [Faith in the Narratives] (1971) and "Jayamaya Aaphumatra Likhapani Aaipugi" [Then Jayamaya Alone Reached Likhapani] from *Bipana Kaitpaya* [Waking Moments] (1960). Rai sets the protagonist in Darjeeling in the late 1950s, in the first work of fiction to examine his quest, suffering, and acceptance of his present state of being in the precarious world. The second fiction depicts the struggle of people returning home to Nepal from Burma after World War II. The author writes a frightening narrative of the protagonist's struggle to reach Likhapani as they lose everything along the way. These two works of fiction show that Rai writes about human fate, their struggle, and the determinants of human fate. Rai's characters struggle to awaken their inner selves and accept them as a means to the potential within them. By writing about human suffering, Rai contemplates human existence in general. This article reads Rai's selected short fiction through the lens of Sartrean existentialism to explore the role of suffering in awakening the inner sensibility, enabling one to telescope the inner being.

Keywords: existential quest, precarity, fate, free will, suffering

Introduction

Existentialists view human life as precarious, lacking a predetermined essence. Instead of the divine force or natural laws,

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human beings want their choices to shape, define, and chart the course for human existence. The French existentialist thinker Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) claims that existence precedes essence; therefore, humans first come into this world without any fixed purpose, and later they freely find a purpose for themselves. For him, a person is radically free to choose his own path: he bears responsibility for his choices and actions. His will is dictated by himself, not by any divine power, nature, or societal forces.

Indian-Nepali writer Indra Bahadur Rai (1927-2017) has written many short stories about the lives of people living in Darjeeling, Assam, and Burma. This article analyzes two short stories, "Tyasari Bacheko Chha Tyasari Nai" [This is How he has Lived on] (1971) (referred to as "This is How" hereafter) and "Jayamaya Aaphumatra Likhapani Aaipugi" [Then Jayamaya Alone Reached Likhapani] (referred to as "Jayamaya" hereafter) (1960) through the lens of Sartre's existentialism to explore how the characters navigate toward meaningful existence amidst the complexities of the world and their own suffering. "This is How" captures Ruplal's precarious state. A small lump appears on his face, just above his left eye. It disrupts his world as he cannot face the world with such a thing on his face. The lump destabilizes Ruplal's sense of being, for it makes him question his meaning, his existence, and his significance. After going through a severe storm within himself, he decides to live the rest of his life with that lump.

In "Jayamaya," Rai depicts the struggle of the people returning home in Nepal from Burma after World War II. Leaving their property, land, and cattle behind in Burma, the people set out to reach Nepal. Among them, Jayamaya loses her mother to illness, her father to the raging river, and everything on the way home. Finally, she is all but herself as she reaches Likhapani. However, she continues her journey despite difficult and frightening incidents. Rup Lal and Jayamay display unmatched courage in fighting against the uneven forces of the world, overcoming torture and having faith in their own power to resolve the complexities of life. In this study, we read both works of fiction in Nepali and translated the quoted/cited materials into English ourselves.

Contemporary Reception of Rai's Fictional Works

An acclaimed name in Indian Nepali writings, Indra Bahadur Rai has contributed to the body of Nepali literature through fiction and essays. His works seek the meaning lying underneath the seemingly coherent outer structure. Manjushree Thapa mentions Rai in the list of important Nepali modern fiction writers (73), while Thadathil describes Rai as "a venerable pioneer of Indian Nepali language and literature" (22). Thapa and Thadathil acknowledge Rai's significant contribution to Nepali literature. Similarly, Kamala Sankrityayan praises him as "a versatile writer of Nepali literature" (174). The author is best known for introducing "leela-lekhan" and "tesro aayam" to Nepali literature (Thadathil 22). The first concept refers to playfulness in writing, and the second literally means 'the third dimension.' Such critical vocabularies serve as a point of departure for examining his ways of developing plot and characters.

Most of Rai's fictional works are set in Darjeeling in the mid-twentieth century. His works narrate the stories of people of Nepali origin living in Darjeeling. In "Jayamaya," he narrates the journey of Nepali people who are forced to flee Burma during the Japanese invasion of the Second World War. "This is How" depicts the protagonist's psychological conflict after a small lump appears on his face. As he often writes about Nepali-origin people living in India, transnational identity becomes a dominant concern for critics. Rai captures the realities of Darjeeling through his insider observations. "The lives of the Nepalis of Darjeeling would provide the theme for much of his writings" (Chakravarthi 44). In history, the Anglo-Nepal War ended with the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816, and Nepal had to "cede lakhs of square miles of Nepalese territory to the British East India Company, together with the Nepali people living thereon (Rai 150). Those people settled in India, mostly in the north-western region, as soldiers, farmers, labourers, and pensioners. Pradhan mentions that their number in the District of Darjeeling and the various States of Assam and Sikkim increased by leaps and bounds (21). Although they have become citizens of India, they continue to follow Nepali culture and speak Nepali, considering it their own. These people are continuously negotiating between their legal identity as Indians and their cultural identity as Nepalis. Tamang observes that Rai captures "the realities of Darjeeling based on his

observation as an insider" (15). The identity crisis of the Indian Nepali is portrayed in Rai's fiction.

Rai is credited with founding the "Leela-Lekhan" as a new style in writing fiction. "Leela Lekhan which means that there is no singular objective truth, as there can be no judgment but only views. Leela Lekhan is a conglomeration of both eastern and western ideas enmeshed in one way or the other" (Thadathil 25). Such works see the words and worlds as play in an unending chain of possibilities. R.P Lama observes Rai's style as "an experimental dimension" (150). Also, Bhusal and Bhattarai argue, "Furthermore, Rai, along with Bairagi Kainla and Ishwor Ballav, introduced 'tesro aayam' (Third Dimension) movement in Nepali literature, bringing modernity in Nepali literature. Bhusal and Bhattarai state, "Indra Bahadur Rai's stories were anti-traditional" (108). Rai's style of writing was later followed by other Nepali writers who wanted to establish new values and bring freshness to Nepali short fiction. Rai is also famous for "a multi-dimensional style of criticism" (Sankrityayan 174). In this regard, Pradhan mentions, "They have launched novel experiments in the field of poetry, short stories, and other writing" (23). Ghanashyam Nepal credits Rai for "highly commendable accomplishments in the field of literary criticism and language-study" (116). Rai has significantly contributed to Nepali literature from India by adding a substantial body of work and remarkable innovations in approaches to the world.

Furthermore, Phuyal interprets Rai's writing from a new historicist perspective, arguing that "Indra Bahadur Rai explicitly locates the national history in the happenings of the novels" (14). Portraying the historical reality of its time, Rai's 1964 *There Is a Carnival Today* reflects the social and political transition of Darjeeling in the 1960s. In his novel, the characters represent the voices of the marginalized who reside in the hills of Darjeeling and work in the tea estates. Also, Neupane's analysis aligns with Phuyal's as Neupane writes, "… the political scenario of erstwhile Darjeeling can be inferred from the political activities and aspirations of Janak and Bhudev…" (275). Rai presents an alternative history of the Indian Nepali community through literature. His stories reflect the Second World War and the Gorkhaland movement through the incidents and characters.

Indra Bahadur Rai is widely recognised for his role in "the movement for recognition of Nepali language" in the constitution of India. He led the "bhasa andolan movement" movement demanding the inclusion of Nepali in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution (Thadathil 22). It was a long struggle by Nepali Indians for their identity. "The Government of India eventually included Nepali in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India in 1992" (Chakravarthi 45). "Jayamaya" and "That's How" present the struggle of human beings for their existence and survival. Thus, these stories can be interpreted through an existentialist lens.

Departure

Multiple readings of "Jayamaya" and "This is How" centre on issues such as identity crisis, diasporic experience, trauma, and stylistic innovation. The studies analyse the texts through the lenses of transnationalism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and new historicism. However, no existing studies shed any light on the characters' wills and desires for survival. The selected short stories portray the essential human quest for being somebody of some significance in the world: the fictional works project human beings in the extreme state of suffering. Such a picture ultimately disillusions individuals, enabling them to reach a stage of self-realization. The study bridges the existing gap by offering an intensive critical analysis of the selected fictions through the lens of Sartrean existentialism by examining Rai's ways of dealing with precarity, freedom of choice, will, and self-realization in relation to human existence.

Sartrean Lens of Reading

French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) argues that human life must constantly encounter precarity as a result of the human quest for freedom. External forces also intensify the impact. As James L. Kastely writes, "Sartre recognises that his initial account of the writer's appeal to the freedom of the reader proceeds as if the reader were a universal and ahistorical being. Such a conception of the reader, however, runs contrary to Sartre's major claim that human beings are creatures who exist only in particular historical situations" (10). Social circumstances write off freedom, infusing human existence with uncertainty and vulnerability. This article interprets Rai's two short stories, "Jayamaya" and "That is How." The analysis

of primary texts in this study is guided by Sartrean existentialism. Sartre argues for the primacy of existence over essence and for the radical freedom of human choice. He argues that human beings are solely responsible for their lives and sufferings, which lead to the awakening of the human will. The major argument is explained with reference to Sartre's ideas and justified with examples from the primary texts. Since Rai's short fictions are originally written in Nepali, the quoted excerpts are translated by the authors.

Writing Stories of Human Suffering and Will to Overcome

The selected short fictions can best be analysed and interpreted through the lens of existentialism. This philosophical theory is connected with strategies of human existence. Sartre's existentialism is inseparably connected with notions such as abandonment, action as essence, the misconception of God's existence, despair as the self-realization of things beyond human control, fate as a misconception, suffering as the dictator of the will, and the quest for survival. Applying these existential notions of Jean Paul Sartre, the present study explores how Rai's narratives in the short stories: "That's How" and "Jayamaya" depict human condition in extremely adverse circumstance in which the will of an individual to do something is guided by their ability to make effective choices, fair, sense of survival, anger, hunger, feeling of being ashamed, and self-realization.

Rai's "This is How" is set in Darjeeling, a hill town where people of Nepali origin reside. The narrative unfolds in different locations within the town. The market, the Railway, and the Hospital are prime locations where the narrative unfolds. These locations have significant meaning for the characters depicted in the story. There are six characters in the story. All of them undergo a wide range of firsthand experiences connected to their innermost quest for existence. Rup Lal, the protagonist, notices a lump above his left eye. He denies the facticity at the outset, saying, "It may not be a lump" (Rai n. p.). The denial of reality and the desire to be a normal man dictate his will. However, he cannot perpetuate his existence with this kind of rejection of reality for long.

His struggles to live with a deeply ingrained mindset terribly suffer him. It results in his gradual acceptance of the fact that he

continues living on this earth. He says, "Now I must call it a lump…why is this to me?" (n. p.). Analyzing this statement through the lens of existentialism, it becomes evident that existence precedes essence: if there is a man, he will have a chance to experience the world; otherwise, not. Sartre supports this view when he states, "…existence precedes essence…man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterward" (28). This existential view is the aptest one to apply to Rup Lal's reactions to the lump near his eye. After living with mental turmoil for some time created by the lump, he eventually realizes that it is not his perfect body that defines who he is, but what matters is how he chooses to live, act, and shape himself as a person despite the lump.

Rup Lal develops an intense anxiety regarding how other people perceive his deformity. When they look at him closely, he finds himself as an object requiring judgment rather than a thoughtful individual with absolute control over his identity. In this context, his will is shaped by others' responses to his physical appearance. Rup Lal himself says, "Everyone sees outer appearance…they look" (n. p.). "He saw another man in the mirror" (n. p.). These lines reflect how society objectifies individuals, judges them by their physical appearance, and rejects their inner potential. The protagonist in Rai's short fiction pays little attention to the lump, yet he still suffers greatly from the contemplation of being ashamed and an object of judgment. At this point in the story, shame and suffering, which become the existential elements, dictate the protagonist's will. Rai showcases the Sartrean existential notion of intersubjectivity when the protagonist in his fiction sees himself as another man in the mirror. The presence of another changes the truth about him. Jean Paul Sartre explains how the existence of an individual is connected to others when he states, "I cannot obtain any truth about myself except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence" (45). This view underlies Rup Lal's understanding of himself as an object for others.

Rup Lal contemplates for a moment and decides that the power of the lump exists over him only because he allowed it. He resolves to surpass it through his own action when he says, "It became big because I acknowledged it. I must be able to be bigger than this" ("This is How" n. p.). This evidence from the story implies that, from

an existential perspective, an individual does possess absolute freedom to make choices that make a difference in their life, and that these choices are the product of human consciousness. The lump of Rup Lal would not make such a big difference for him if he accepted it as an ordinary event. Moreover, his resolution to be bigger than the lump signifies that man is not a fixed object, but an ever-evolving subject that builds up through actions. This interpretation is strongly grounded in Sartrean existential philosophy, which asserts that "Man is nothing else but what he purposes …he is the sum of his actions" (Sartre 41). Viewed through this lens, Rup Lal's growth in the story is not biological; it is the totality of the actions he freely chooses to sustain his existence despite some concerns about his physical deformity.

Rup Lal's physical condition greatly draws the attention of other people around. A visitor comes to visit him. The visitor suggests that he have medical treatment, saying, "Doesn't it ache? Haven't you shown it to a doctor? He will give an injection and operate on it. Rup Lal asks, 'Does it disappear?' Then the lump will disappear" ("This is How" n. p.). By questioning if the lump will surely disappear, Rup Lal accepts what has happened to him as part of his physical reality. He is free to make his own decision about his existence, which entirely depends on acknowledging reality with happiness. Rup Lal ultimately refuses to undergo medical surgery to remove the lump. This is a crucial moment in the story when he asserts his subjectivity over his facticity, choosing to embed the lump as a constituent part of his physical appearance. Here, his 'will' is shaped by his acceptance of who he is. He says, "'The doctor cuts it off, but I will live with this lump" (This is How" n. p.). Rup Lal's self-decision to live with the lump on his forehead shows that his will is no longer dictated by social shame; instead, it is shaped by his authentic choice. He refuses to let a doctor fix his essence. He also realizes that other people have nothing to do with how he should live. He is no longer an object for others, but an incessantly changing subject with his own existence.

Humans are optimistic and rational creatures. He exists on this earth due to the ray of hope that lies in him. The moment when a man loses all hope marks the end of his life. In this short fiction, Rai portrays Rup Lal, the protagonist, as a hopeful, sensible being who can transform suffering and other life challenges into opportunities to

understand human existence and perpetuate his own life. After rigorous struggles, Rup Lal acknowledges the fact that he cannot live worrying every time about the lump, although it makes him look ugly. He accepts it when he says, "I learnt to live life with what it is like. He said that we have to live life as it is, accepting all that occurs in it" ("This is How" n. p.). This evidence from the story implies that Rup Lal, whose courage and acceptance dictate the will, ultimately discovers the reality of life, realizing that suffering and deformity are universals. One cannot escape from this bitter reality for a meaningful existence. He also realizes that to live authentically is to accept one's lumps and continue to exist with the meaningful sum of actions in the world. Sartre's existentialism, that "existentialism is optimistic; it is a doctrine of action" (Sartre 56), reflects Rup Lal's transition from despairing over his deformity to achieving authentic existence through integration of meaningful actions.

In "Jayamaya," Rai portrays six major characters, including a fifteen-year-old girl named Jayamaya (the protagonist), struggling through extreme circumstances to perpetuate their existence. As Kastely argues, "Sartre's way out of the problem of disruptive personal interests is to require the reader to assume a Kantian disinterestedness. But, as we saw earlier, this solves the problem of obstructing interests only to create the problem of abstract understanding" (18). The characters have to go through extreme hunger, fear of being killed, loss of family members, abandonment, and make immediate choices in seemingly absurd, despairing situations. The events in the story are set at specific times and places, from Burma to Likhapani, Assam, India. The quest for survival to continue existence is supposed to have become a primary issue for all characters in the story.

The narrative unfolds with a harrowing journey of a large group of Nepali-origin people settled in Burma, which occurred due to the fear of the advancing Japanese army during the Second World War. Jayamaya's father, Sudedar Shivajit Rai, is a leader of the fleeing group. He warns others for leaving the place when he says:

> It has been more than ten or twelve days that people have been continuously fleeing in large processions. The Japanese army had arrived at Lashio, marching along the Irrawaddy River and up the hill from Tangi. There was a rumor that they had already arrived at Maina

> Basti. The pensioner, Subedar Dhanapath of the neighbor, had fled with his family. Baghbir, the village headman, also fled in a hurry yesterday. All are fleeing away continuously. ("Jayamaya" n. p.)

Analyzing this excerpt through the lens of Sartrean existentialism, it becomes evident that people are in extremely difficult times, compelling Jayamaya's family and other villagers to flee to a safe place to preserve their existence. The fear of war and uncertainty override them by erasing their social recognition, rank, identity, and role. Since everyone, irrespective of their ranks and authority, flees away, they have a radical freedom to make choices for the sake of their own existence. As the excerpt above implies, fear, despair, suffering, and chaos shape everyone's will, compelling them to make choices for survival. The interpretation of the quoted text aligns with Sartre's view that "existentialism puts every man in possession of himself…and places entire responsibility for his existence upon his own shoulders" (Sartre 29). This view of Sartre is clearly reflected in Rai's story, in which every character emphasizes the essential role of their actions in bringing themselves out of extreme circumstances and maintaining their existence.

Jayamaya's journey from a loved, cared for, and protected teenager to the only survivor of the extreme circumstances caused by the war reflects fundamental themes of externalism. Her role throughout the narrative depicts the transition from a socially defined essence to her self-created existence. At the outset, she is entirely dependent on her parents. Rai suggests this when he states, "Fifteen-year-old Jayamaya comes out to the cool balcony of her two-storied house and again goes back inside to cuddle with her mother" ("Jayamaya" n. p.). Interpreting the quote from a Sartrean existential perspective, it becomes clear that, at the beginning, she receives total protection from her parents. At this point in the story, her strong sense of dependence dictates her will. However, the fear of the advancing Japanese armed force wipes out all her essence, leaving her a mere subject of her own existence.

Before the harrowing journey begins, the group of refugees led by Jayamaya's father prepares itself, realizing that there is no one to protect them- not the government or any other institutions. The sense of helplessness in the story becomes clear when Rai states, "The Subedar said in a firm voice with a tired face, pick up everything; we

must go too. There is no one to stop the enemy" ("Jayamay" n. p.). Analyzing this textual evidence through the lens of Sartrean existentialism, focusing on the concept of "abandonment" (Sartre 32), which he defines as the realization that the belief in the existence of God is false and baseless, Subedar knows that the essence of being the owner of the house and having a respectable position in the community is no longer valid. He also acknowledges that there is no one to ensure their safety, and therefore, they have to seek a safe landing path through suffering. Here, his will is dictated by the stark reality of the world where he is left in an entirely destitute condition.

Extreme circumstances compel people to make quick decisions for survival and to perpetuate existence. The journey of the Gorkhali refugees, including the protagonist, Jayamaya, and her parents, from Burma to Assam begins in a horrific situation in which the characters perform extraordinary acts. Subedar sorts out certain items and destroys others, including a gramophone and a wall clock, before the journey begins, prioritizing his conscious existence and freedom. As Rai writes, "After preparing three bundles of the appliances, Subedar was firing at the gramophone, pitcher, wall clock, pile of records, and at the trunk—a person fired at an ox" ("Jayamaya" n. p.). The quoted text implies that Subedar's destruction of household appliances reflects his will to erase his past self and to invent himself as a responsible subject, even amidst ruin. Subedar's action and its implied meaning align with Sartrean existential notion, which asserts that "…abandonment goes with anguish which is the sense of complete and profound responsibility" (Sartre 30). By taking full responsibility for the total loss, Subedar proves that suffering is not a passive element of life, but a domain that shapes the will to identify a new reality.

Humans normalize suffering and pain by acknowledging them as part of life. Jayamaya, her parents, and their companions encounter the same fate during the terrible journey driven by their strong optimism. The way they encounter dead bodies on the difficult trail encourages Jayamaya and her father to move further ahead, integrating their pain and suffering as a part of their existence. The author conveys the theme of human survival when he writes, "People who tried to flee away on foot were dying one after the other. Then, Subedar gradually lost his mind. Everything seemed ordinary

for him" ("Jayamaya" n. p.). The interpretation of the quoted text through the existential perspective makes clear that Subedar undergoes an existential transition from anguish to despair, recognizing that many things, such as death, are beyond one's control. At this point in the story, Subedar's only mission to move forward to a safe place dictates his will. It aligns with Sartre's existential philosophy, who notes "…despair… means that we limit ourselves to a reliance upon that which is within our wills" (Sartre 39). Sartre's view of existence emphasizes that an individual is not, but the sum of his actions stemming from their will, as in Rai's stories.

Unprecedented demise of Jayamaya's mother and father, one after the other, during the journey. Jayamaya's role shifts from a mere follower to an entirely responsible person. She has to bear the weight of her family's existence by herself. "Subedar started to weep, bending over the corpse of his wife. Jayamaya let her wailing come out in the midst of the forest" ("Jayamaya" n. p.). At this point in the narrative, Jamaya and her father are left only with absolute freedom to make choices against the double grief-ridden salutation. The wailings of both characters are subsequent effects of their wills, dictated by the extreme pressure of the circumstances. Despite the loss of a family member, Jayamaya and her father choose to continue the journey. However, a great misfortune befalls Jayamaya when her father disappears while crossing the surging Takab River, a symbol of life and death in the story. Regarding the disappearance of Subedar, Rai writes, "Jayamaya frequently summoned her father. Subedar appeared nowhere" ("Jayamaya" n. p.). Now, Jayamaya stays alone, stripped of all her past essence, without knowing what happens then. In this regard, Sartre states that "…existentialism puts everyman in possession of himself and places the entire responsibility upon his own shoulders" (Sartre 29). This Sartrean view of existentialism applies to Jayamaya's plight, that she ultimately bears all responsibility for her new existence.

Finally, Jayamaya reaches her destination alone, bidding farewell to her dear father and mother, having endured a horrible journey, and is set for survival under extremely adverse circumstances. Regarding her panic but successful arrival at Likhapani, Asam, Rai notes, "After walking for twenty-four days, Jayamaya and others

arrive at Likhapani, Assam. None of them have happiness on their faces" ("Jayamaya" n. p.). Jayamaya's arrival at Likhapani as the only survivor of her family after losing her parents on the way is essentially a significant part of the whole narrative. Her sole arrival at the destination is directly connected to the Sartrean existential concept of the lonely individual who is bound to carry the weight of their existence. Jayamaya's strong commitment to survival and existence, along with her pursuit of a new essence in India, dictates her will throughout the journey, characterized by suffering, struggle, optimism, and despair. At the end of the narrative, she is nothing but the total sum of her bitter experiences that she undergoes during the twenty-two days of the journey. She is also an exemplary character who justifies Sartrean existential notion that "…man is condemned to be free…because from the moment that he is thrown into this world, he is responsible for everything he does" (Sartre 34). Jayamaya's absolute freedom after her parents' death dictates her will to make the right choice for survival and existence.

Conclusion

Rai demonstrates the precarity of human life in these two stories. Protagonists discover their inner selves as they navigate difficult circumstances. The protagonists' struggle to maintain their existence creates suffering. This suffering plays a vital role in freeing human beings from the illusion that they have a predetermined essence. They have to confront unexpected problems and find ways to live through them, even though it is painful. In a vulnerable situation, they discover their inner strength. Ruplal's acceptance of the lump and Jayamaya's arrival at Likhapani are conscious choices. They are compelled to encounter themselves as free and conscious beings who cannot escape reality, but must live with it. Their choices reflect their freedom and responsibility. They gradually transform self-deception and anxiety into authenticity, preserving their human agency. Thus, Rai shows that characters' suffering awakens their inner selves and enables them to realize their potential. Their choice to live on despite extreme suffering reflects human instinct to preserve their existence. In the end, they become free individuals, shaped by their own choices. Rai shows that human beings are not defined by what happens to them, but by their choices to deal with their circumstances.

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