International Journal of Social Science and Human Research

ISSN (print): 2644-0679, ISSN (online): 2644-0695

Volume 09 Issue 09 September 2026

DOI: 10.47191/ijsshr/v9-i9-56, Impact factor- 8.361

Page No: 7925-7930

Existential and Posthuman Interpretation of Jack Hunt's "Strain": A Philosophical Analysis of Pandemic Fiction

G. S. Vimal Gnanamani[1*], Dr. C. Jothi[2]

[1*]Research Scholar, Department of English, Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Krishnankovil, Tamil Nadu, India

[2]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Krishnankovil, Tamil Nadu, India.

*** Correspondence:** *G. S. Vimal Gnanamani*

ABSTRACT: Analysis through the lens of Sartrean existentialism and Rosi Braidotti's posthuman ethics of Jack Hunt's Strain. The paper looks at the potential for pandemic fiction to create a philosophical space that analyses human freedom, responsibility, authenticity and relational interdependence during times of civilizational collapse. Using qualitative textual analysis method, the article investigates the responses of Frank Talbot and Chester to the Agora Virus outbreak. Frank's metamorphosis from fear-driven inaction to responsible action signifies existential authenticity. Chester's moral decline exemplifies bad faith or ethical failure. The analysis further shows that survival in a crisis is not just about one's agency but also about the care of others and our interconnectedness. While it is often that popular narratives cast a focus on the breakdown of society through pandemics, Strain presents the opposite angle. It places a focus on the tension between one's personal freedom and the collective responsibility of society. The paper also critiques the limits of heroic individualism and the novel's cramped vision of group suffering. The findings imply that contemporary pandemic fiction reformulates human identity through a fusion of existential ethics and posthuman relational ethics. To summarize, Strain furthers ongoing literary discussions on survival, ethics and what it means to be human amid radical uncertainty (the uncertainty of an unknown future).

KEYWORDS: Pandemic Fiction; Existentialism; Posthumanism; Sartrean Philosophy; Authenticity; Relational Ethics; Jack Hunt; Strain; Human Responsibility; Crisis Literature

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary pandemic fiction has become an important literary space in which to investigate the psychological, ethical and philosophical effects of large-scale crises. Epidemic narratives tend to transcend the medical catastrophe and open wider questions about humanity, morality, fear and survival. More and more literary scholars have turned to the study of pandemic fiction addressing the breakdown of social order and human being under conditions of uncertainty. In this case, Strain by Jack Hunt, a notable profile of post-apocalyptic pandemic literature, unites a survival narrative with philosophical inquiry.

H9N3 Agora Virus novel shows a world wherein institutional systems, healthcare structures and social order rapidly fly apart. The pandemic is not simply presented as a biological disaster. The narrative use of crisis opens up questions about freedom, authenticity, fear, morality and our common humanity. The characters have to make moral and life choices without basic social structures. The pandemic serves as a "limit situation," where people are confronted with the reality of death, responsibility and uncertainty.

An analysis of the novel is conducted through the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and posthuman ethics of Rosi Braidotti. Sartre's existentialism is a form of humanism characterized by radical freedom, individual responsibility, and necessity of authentic action in a world not only absurd but also unstable. As Sartre stated, we are ‘condemned to be free’ which means that people will always be held accountable for their choices. On the contrary, Braidotti's posthuman theory opposes this excessive individualism and stresses that everyone is interconnected through unequal relations and materialities. The integration of these two theoretical perspectives allows for a more nuanced understanding of how Strain negotiates personal agency and collective responsibility in catastrophe.

The characters of Frank Talbot and Chester are particularly contrasted in the novel. Frank changes from a fearful isolated man to a responsible protector, showing existential movement towards authenticity. Chester exemplifies moral decline and bad faith as he exploits social collapse for private gain instead of ethical engagement. By virtue of the contrasting trajectories of the two characters, the novel investigates how crises reveal the strengths and failures of human existence.

While many studies have looked at pandemic literature from psychological, sociological and political perspectives, few works have looked into the area of existentialism and posthuman ethics in the contemporary pandemic novel. This study seeks to fill that gap

by examining how Strain reconfigures ideas of humanity, ethical responsibility, and survival within a collapsing world. Furthermore, the paper argues that the novel puts forth a model of "relational authenticity", in which individual freedom becomes meaningful only along the lines of care, responsibility, and mutual survival.

The research aims to investigate how Strain conceives of the existential crisis, the ethical transformations and posthuman relationality in pandemic fiction. The paper integrates literary analysis and philosophical interpretation with wider texts and discourses on the contemporary narratives of crisis, and changing meanings of human being in modernity.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

TABLE I. SUMMARY OF REVIEW OF LITERATURE

S. No	*Author(s) & Year*	*Title*	*Objective of the Study*	*Methodology*	*Key Findings*	*Research Gap*
1	Albert Camus (1947)	The Plague	To explore human suffering and existential absurdity during a plague outbreak	Philosophical fiction and existential narrative	Human beings confront absurdity through moral responsibility and solidarity	Does not examine posthuman relational ethics
2	Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/2018)	Being and Nothingness	To explain existential freedom, bad faith, and authenticity	Existential philosophical analysis	Human beings are responsible for their choices despite external conditions	Not applied specifically to pandemic fiction
3	Rosi Braidotti (2013)	The Posthuman	To develop posthuman theories of relational identity	Posthuman theoretical framework	Human identity is relational and interconnected	Limited focus on literary pandemic narratives
4	Rosi Braidotti (2019)	Posthuman Knowledge	To expand affirmative ethics and collective survival theories	Critical posthuman analysis	Ethical survival depends on relational care and interdependence	Does not analyse existential literary texts
5	Thomas R. Flynn (2006)	Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction	To introduce key existential concepts	Philosophical overview	Existential crises reveal freedom and responsibility	No connection with pandemic literature
6	Jonathan Webber (2009)	The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre	To examine Sartrean existential ethics	Philosophical criticism	Authenticity emerges through conscious ethical choice	Lacks literary application to crisis fiction
7	Rupayan Perry (2020)	"Resonance of Existentialism on Pandemic Literature"	To analyse existential themes in pandemic fiction	Literary analysis	Pandemic fiction reflects anxiety, mortality, and existential struggle	Limited posthuman theoretical engagement
8	Tyina Steptoe Stovall (2020)	"How Literature Can Capture the Essence of Life in a Pandemic"	To study emotional realities in pandemic narratives	Humanities-based interpretative study	Literature represents emotional and social dimensions of pandemics	Does not address existential authenticity
9	Sean Malpas (2012)	"Existentialism and Literature: An Introduction"	To connect existential philosophy with literary narratives	Literary-philosophical analysis	Existential literature examines alienation and meaning-making	No focus on contemporary pandemic fiction
10	Roger Luckhurst (2013)	The Trauma Question	To investigate trauma representation in literature	Trauma theory analysis	Crisis narratives shape memory and identity	Limited engagement with posthuman ethics
11	Pramod K. Nayar (2014)	Posthumanism	To explain posthumanist literary and cultural theory	Cultural and literary theory	Human identity is shaped through technological and ecological networks	Pandemic literature not specifically examined

12	Cary Wolfe (2010)	What is Posthumanism?	To redefine humanism through posthuman theory	Philosophical and cultural analysis	Human exceptionalism must be challenged	Does not address existential dimensions
13	Giorgio Agamben (1998)	Homo Sacer	To analyse sovereignty and "bare life" during crisis	Political philosophy	Crisis reduces humans to vulnerable biological existence	Limited literary interpretation
14	Judith Butler (2004)	Precarious Life	To examine vulnerability and collective mourning	Ethical and political analysis	Human interconnectedness emerges through shared vulnerability	No direct focus on pandemic fiction
15	Zygmunt Bauman (2000)	Liquid Modernity	To analyse instability in modern society	Sociological theory	Modern life is marked by uncertainty and fragility	Does not engage with literary pandemic texts
16	Slavoj Žižek (2020)	Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World	To interpret philosophical impacts of COVID-19	Philosophical-cultural analysis	Pandemics reveal political and social contradictions	Limited literary analysis
17	Michel Foucault (1977)	Discipline and Punish	To study systems of surveillance and power	Historical-philosophical analysis	Crisis conditions intensify institutional control	No existential framework
18	Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962)	Phenomenology of Perception	To explore embodied human experience	Phenomenological philosophy	Human experience is shaped through bodily perception	Pandemic narratives not explored
19	Jack Hunt (2017)	Strain	To depict survival and moral crisis during pandemic collapse	Pandemic fiction narrative	Crisis reveals ethical transformation and social fragmentation	Requires deeper philosophical analysis
20	Present Study	"Existentialism and Posthuman Ethics in Strain"	To analyse existential authenticity and relational ethics in pandemic fiction	Qualitative textual and philosophical analysis	Survival depends on both individual responsibility and collective interdependence	Combines existentialism and posthuman ethics within pandemic literature

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The primary theoretical framework employed in this study to analyse Strain is Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism and Rosi Braidotti's posthuman ethics. Through a reading of the two philosophical approaches, this study develops a better understanding of the way pandemic fiction articulates freedom, responsibility, identity, and survival under conditions of social collapse.

Sartrean existentialism holds that human beings are fundamentally free and therefore responsible for their choices. Sartre states that people are condemned to be free, which means that even under the most extreme circumstances, they cannot escape responsibility. Existentialism denies the notion that morality or meaning is predetermined by an external system, institution or tradition. Instead, individuals create their own meaning through choice and action. When crisis strikes, this freedom becomes more evident because typical social systems lose their power and people must face uncertainty head on.

In Sartre's philosophy, "bad faith" (mauvaise foi) involves lying to oneself; a denial of freedom itself lies therein. A person in bad faith tries to evade responsibility by attributing their actions to circumstances, social roles, or external pressures. Authenticity occurs when a person achieves self-realization about their freedom and its limitations. Strain's pandemic environment is best understood as an existential crisis that reveals either genuine engagement or moral failure. Frank Talbot's metamorphosis exemplifies authentic existence, while Chester's moral and ethical degradation depicts bad faith and existential failure.

This study also examines relationality and liveability in the novel by drawing on Rosi Braidotti's posthuman ethics alongside existentialism. Braidotti disrupts anthropocentrism by asserting that subjectivity is formed through networks of relationships involving humans, technologies, environments, and other material systems, not from a singular autonomous source. Her affirmative ethics emphasises collective care and interdependence for sustainable living in crises.

Pandemic fiction benefits from posthuman ethics, since infectious disease demonstrates the interconnectedness of existence. During pandemics, survivors are not just the strong, but also those who care, cooperate and share in vulnerability. The failure of systems in

Strain reveals how interdependent human beings are within their networks and communities. Developing Frank's character means developing not only his existential responsibility but also his relational care for others, especially his family and community.

This study benefits from a productive analytical framework that combines Sartrean existentialism and Braidotti's posthuman ethics. Braidotti emphasises relational ethics, while Sartre emphasises individual freedom and moral responsibility. Collectively, these theories offer an explanation of how Strain navigates the tension between individual agency and community survival amid catastrophic conditions. The essence of true survival then lies in more than just the bravery of an individual.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach that utilises textual and philosophical analysis. The main focus of the research is a close reading of Strain to examine existential crisis, ethical responsibility, and posthuman relationality in pandemic fiction. Qualitative textual analysis is especially suitable for literary studies since it facilitates the detailed interpretation of themes, characterization, symbolism and philosophical meaning.

Based on existentialist and posthuman theories, the paper uses an interpretative analytical approach. The psychological and ethical reactions of the characters during the pandemic crisis are analyzed through Jean-Paul Sartre's notions of freedom, authenticity, anguish and bad faith. Rosi Braidotti's theory of relational ethics, interconnectivity, and posthuman subjectivity is also used to study collective survival, care and material interdependence in the novel.

The study mainly focuses on the character development of Frank Talbot and Chester. It examines how Frank's shift from fear-based isolation to responsible engagement marks existential authenticity and relational awareness, alongside an analysis of Chester's moral decline as bad faith, a failure of ethics, and a refusal of communal responsibility. By contrasting the two figures, the study examines how crises bring out the best and worst in humans.

The analysis is also supported by secondary sources including scholarly books, journal articles, and theoretical texts pertaining to existentialism, posthumanism, and pandemic literature. The works of Sartre, Braidotti, Flynn, Webber, Malpas, Perry and others were instrumental in the philosophical reading of the novel.

The goal of the methodology is not to present statistical or empirical findings but rather interpretative findings relating to pandemic fiction and philosophy. The paper examines the role literary narratives play in creating meaning and how they present moral dilemmas and present-day concerns regarding humanity, survival and social collapse.

The methodology of close textual reading and philosophical criticism examines how Strain can shed light on contemporary existentialism, posthuman ethics, and crisis literature.

V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The way Strain tells its story reveals how the pandemic, rather than simply being a medical disaster, is a philosophical crisis that destabilises human identity, ethics, and sociality. The H9N3 Agora Virus destroys institutional systems so that individuals must face fear, uncertainty, and ethical responsibility without institutional support. The collapse enables the novel to create a literary space for the simultaneous emergence of the existential and the posthuman.

The protagonist of the novel undergoes significant character development. In the opening of the story, Frank is gripped by fear, loneliness, and an obsessive dread of contamination. His attempt to isolate himself from society is an attempt to avoid uncertainty and vulnerability. According to Sartre, this condition is bad faith because Frank initially tries to flee the anxiety and responsibility that come from human freedom. Yet, the continuous progress of the epidemic compels him, bringing forth elements that cannot be controlled or ignored. As institutional safeguards fail, Frank slowly recognises the need for action and responsibility.

Frank moves from hiding in fear to becoming an active participant, demonstrating authenticity. Real, authentic life emerges when a person, under uncertain and dangerous conditions, recognises his freedom and chooses responsibility. Frank does not ultimately conquer fear; he learns to act meaningfully despite it. His readiness to risk himself for the protection of others reflects an awareness that is both existential and ethical. Thus, the novel exposes that crises become moments of self-discovery only when individuals accept responsibility for action and belief.

Simultaneously, Frank's transformation echoes posthuman relational ethics. His actions gain meaning because they spring from relational, caring, and collective survival, rather than isolated self-interest. Braidotti's conception of existence as inter-being illustrates how survival depends on relations, attachment, vulnerability, and relatedness. Frank's ethical growth is not the product of sheer heroic individuality; he learns that he is responsible not just to himself but to his family and the wider community. The pandemic underscores that no individual is an island and that all are interdependent.

Chester serves as the embodiment of existential and ethical failure. He does not act responsibly or reflectively during the crisis, but instead takes advantage of social collapse for personal gain. Chester exemplifies Sartre's principle of "bad faith" as he refuses to accept responsibility for his immoral acts. Rather than adapting to the ethical demands of the pandemic, he treats the disintegration of society as justification for corruption and violence. His descent into moral decay illustrates that crisis can heighten egoism and moral decline rather than personal development.

From a posthuman view, Chester signifies the destruction of the communal networks necessary for survival. The erosion of trust, cooperation and collective care undermines the possibility of sustainable human relationships in catastrophe. Frank and Chester thus stand in contrast to one another, forming the central philosophical argument of the novel: Frank's character expresses relational authenticity and ethical responsibility, while Chester reveals moral fragmentation and social disintegration.

The narrative further examines the tension between individual liberty and collective reliance. Existentialism foregrounds personal choice, while posthuman ethical theory highlights interdependence and relational survival. Strain acknowledges both extremes but attempts to reconcile them: survival requires choosing to act for oneself and for others. Personal freedom carries ethical relevance only when it aims to protect, care for and benefit another.

The story also reveals the fear and uncertainty pervading the characters' lives. The pandemic setting heightens existential anxiety by confronting the characters with death, instability and meaninglessness. Nevertheless, the novel suggests that uncertainty itself becomes the condition through which authenticity emerges. The characters must create values and make ethical choices without any guarantee of success. The pandemic, in this sense, functions as a philosophical "limit situation" that discloses both the fragility of civilization and the possibility of moral transformation.

All in all, the novel showcases pandemic fiction as a tool for exploring essential questions of humanity, ethics and survival. Through existential and posthuman lenses, Strain illustrates that crises do not merely dismantle social systems but redefine human being and ethical responsibility.

VI. FINDINGS

The analysis of Strain yields several findings pertaining to existentialism, posthuman ethics, and pandemic fiction.

To begin with, the study demonstrates the nature of existential crises caused by pandemic events. Such limit situations reveal human beings' essential social nature, expose the fragility of social structures, and compel individuals to confront freedom, responsibility and mortality directly. The breakdown of institutional arrangements strips individuals of normal sources of meaning, leaving characters to construct ethical choices themselves.

Furthermore, the study shows that Frank Talbot's transformation traces a movement from bad faith to existential authenticity. His development demonstrates that genuine existence does not mean the absence of fear; instead, it entails acting responsibly in the face of uncertainty and danger. Crisis, in this sense, becomes a catalyst for ethical self-realization.

The research indicates that relational care plays a decisive role in survival within the novel. While existentialism recognizes that human beings are responsible for their actions and relationships, the story suggests that survival cannot be achieved alone; it depends on mutual reliance for love, care and responsibility. Accordingly, the finding shows that the novel merges existential agency with the ethics of posthuman relation.

Chester's character illustrates how crisis can intensify immorality and ethical failure. His behaviour suggests that social collapse is not necessarily an incubator for wisdom or solidarity but is more likely to intensify selfishness, violence and exploitation. The story thus turns pandemic conditions into a test of character.

A further finding shows that the novel reconstructs conventional heroism. Traditional heroic masculinity based on physical survival gives way to ethical responsibility, emotional resilience and relational protection, with the novel valuing care and collective survival over dominance.

Overall, these findings suggest that Strain frames survival as an existential and relational process in contemporary pandemic literature, connecting personal freedom with ethical humanity. The study indicates that it is the harmonising of these two dimensions that allows humanity to endure.

VII. CRITICAL COMMENTS

Although Strain is certainly a philosophical novel that explores the themes of survival during a pandemic, it also has limitations.

A major limitation is the novel's strong reliance on individual heroic transformation. Frank's existential development is central to the narrative, and personal heroism often takes precedence over the collective experience of suffering. As such, the depiction of community-level survival remains largely underdeveloped.

The moral conflict is also drawn in stark terms through the contrast between Frank and Chester. Frank serves as the moral compass of the story, while Chester essentially becomes a representation of decay and corruption. This binary contrast oversimplifies human behaviour during crisis situations, where ethics tend to be far less clear-cut and far more contested.

A further issue concerns the limited representation of broader social experience during the pandemic. The story centres on one person's survival and immediate relationships rather than engaging with class, gender, health, or political exclusion. As a result, the pandemic's socio-political dimensions remain less developed than its philosophical themes.

From a posthuman perspective, the novel partly embraces relational ethics but still retains an underlying anthropocentrism. Despite the pandemic setting, there is insufficient exploration of non-human systems, ecological dimensions and technological interdependencies; the focus remains centred on human emotional and moral struggle.

The story also draws on conventions of post-apocalyptic fiction, such as violence, masculinity, protection, and survival heroism. Such conventions sometimes curtail the novel's capacity for bolder or more inventive depictions of collective care and posthuman coexistence.

Even with these shortcomings, the novel remains significant for the way it merges existential philosophy with contemporary pandemic anxieties. By engaging with themes such as authenticity, fear, ethical responsibility and relational survival, the paper contributes meaningfully to pandemic literature and philosophical criticism.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Strain shows how contemporary pandemic fiction can serve as an important site of philosophical and ethical thinking. The book tackles fundamental dilemmas surrounding freedom, authenticity, morality and human relationships through the collapse of civilization and the H9N3 Agora Virus outbreak. Characters confront uncertainty, fear, and responsibility in pandemic-weary environments that highlight both the strengths and failures of human existence.

The study shows that Sartrean existentialism and Braidotti's posthuman ethics complement each other effectively in interpreting the novel. Sartre's ideas of freedom, bad faith, and authenticity clarify the ethical transformation of Frank Talbot and the moral failure of Chester. At the same time, Braidotti's posthuman theory foregrounds relational care, collective survival and shared life in crisis.

The analysis further shows that the novel proposes a synthesis of autonomy and collective responsibility. Authentic survival is presented as ethical engagement rooted in care, protection and relational awareness, rather than isolationist heroism. The research demonstrates that pandemic fiction reconfigures human identity in terms of existential responsibility and collective interdependence.

While the novel has certain shortcomings, particularly regarding its individual heroism and limited social representation, it remains a valuable contribution to contemporary debates on crisis literature and the philosophical novel. As the title suggests, "strain" is not only physical but also ethical and emotional — a resilience of relationships that helps humanity survive.

The study may encourage future research on contemporary pandemic narratives from the perspectives of trauma studies, eco-criticism, gender studies, and posthuman theory, particularly within post-COVID literary production. Such studies may reveal how contemporary literature continues to shape and reshape human existence within contemporary global reality.

REFERENCES

1) Braidotti, R. (2013). The posthuman. Cambridge: Polity Press.
2) Braidotti, R. (2019). Posthuman knowledge. Cambridge: Polity Press.
3) Camus, A. (1947). The plague (S. Gilbert, Trans.). New York: Knopf.
4) Flynn, T. R. (2006). Existentialism: A very short introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
5) Foucault, M. (1977). Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison. New York: Pantheon Books.
6) Hunt, J. (2017). Strain. Seattle: Independently Published.
7) Luckhurst, R. (2013). The trauma question. London: Routledge.
8) Malpas, S. (2012). Existentialism and literature: An introduction. In S. Crowell (Ed.), The Cambridge companion to existentialism (pp. 217–240). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
9) Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). Phenomenology of perception. London: Routledge.
10) Nayar, P. K. (2014). Posthumanism. Cambridge: Polity Press.
11) Perry, R. (2020). Resonance of existentialism on pandemic literature: An introspection of pandemic literature of the past. Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, 12(5), 1–12.
12) Sartre, J.-P. (2018). Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology. New York: Washington Square Press. (Original work published 1943).
13) Stovall, T. (2020). How literature can capture the essence of life in a pandemic. The Humanities Institute, 1–5.
14) Webber, J. (2009). The existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre. London: Routledge.
15) Wolfe, C. (2010). What is posthumanism? Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
16) Agamben, G. (1998). Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
17) Bauman, Z. (2000). Liquid modernity. Cambridge: Polity Press.
18) Berger, J. (1972). Ways of seeing. London: Penguin Books.
19) Butler, J. (2004). Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence. London: Verso.
20) Žižek, S. (2020). Pandemic! COVID-19 shakes the world. New York: OR Books.

There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial 4.0 Intenational (CC BY-NC 4.0) (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.