



**Embracing the Absurd to Find Meaning
amid the Coronavirus Pandemic in
Saleema Nawaz's *Songs for the
End of the World* (2020)**

By

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Abstract:

March 11, 2020 is an unforgettable day for the whole world as the WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus announced COVID-19 a pandemic. Thus, the world has turned upside down ever since as millions contracted the virus while others lost their lives. Panic and grief overwhelmed the scene, and people have become preoccupied with existential issues such as isolation, identity, freedom, death, and meaning of existence. The focus of the present study is a prophetic novel called *Songs for the End of the World* (2020) by Saleema Nawaz, a Canadian novelist, who depicts a pandemic similar to COVID - 19. Through an understanding of existential concerns and Albert Camus's concept of 'the Absurd', the paper aims to examine how the pandemic threatens the characters' sense of existence, and how they manage to find meaning amid the pandemic. Applying Camus's ideas suggests embracing absurdity as the key to cope with the pandemic and find a meaningful life.

Keywords: pandemic, existential, isolation, identity, freedom, death, meaning, absurd

ملخص :

تبنى العبثية لإيجاد مغزى للحياة فى أثناء جائحة فيروس كورونا المستجد

فى رواية " أغاني نهاية العالم " ٢٠٢٠ للكاتبة سليمة نواز

يعد يوم الحادى عشر من مارس عام ٢٠٢٠ يوم لا ينسى فى تاريخ البشرية حيث أعلن المدير العام لمنظمة الصحة العالمية الدكتور تيدروس أدهانوم غيبرييسوس عن تفشى جائحة فيروس كورونا المستجد. ومنذ ذلك الحين انقلب العالم رأساً على عقب حيث أصيب الملايين بالفيروس بينما فقد آخرون حياتهم، و سيطر الذعر والحزن فأصبح الناس منشغلين بقضايا وجودية شتى مثل العزلة والهوية والحرية والموت ومعنى الوجود. تركز هذه الدراسة على رواية "أغاني نهاية العالم" ٢٠٢٠ للكاتبة الكندية سليمة نواز حيث تنبأت بحدوث جائحة مشابهة لفيروس كورونا المستجد. يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة كيف يهدد الوباء شعور الشخصيات بوجودها وكيف تمكنوا من إيجاد مغزى لحياتهم أثناء الجائحة من خلال تحليل "رواية أغاني نهاية العالم" إن تطبيق أفكار ألبير كامو تشير إلى أن تبني العبثية هو الحل للتصدى للجائحة وإيجاد مغزى للحياة.

**Embracing the Absurd to Find Meaning amid the
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End of the World* (2020)**

March 11, 2020 is an unforgettable day for the whole world as the WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus announced COVID-19 a pandemic. It was the first pandemic prompted by a coronavirus. He warns, "This is not just a public health crisis, it is a crisis that will touch every sector. So every sector and every individual must be involved in the fight." (Organization, 2020). According to the WHO, "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus." It was first transmitted by bats to humans at a Wuhan's open-air 'wet market'. (WebMD, 2021). Thus, the world has turned upside down ever since. What is shocking, according to Marcel Theroux (2020), is that deadly pandemics were thought to be something of the past due to the advancement of science. Till this moment of writing, the WHO (COVID-19) Dashboard mentions 4, 724, 876 million people have lost their lives and 230, 418, 451 million have contracted the virus (Organization, 2021).

COVID-19 is still influencing every field, and, of course, one of these fields is literature. Many writers believe it is too early to start depicting this pandemic; however, it was claimed

there were works of art that have already predicted the outbreak of coronavirus such as *The Eyes of Darkness* (1981), a novel by Dean Koontz, depicting a biological weapon called Wuhan-400 virus created in a laboratory. Of course, this has aroused suspicion, and has caused conspirators to declare COVID-19 to be man-made. In addition, there is *End of Days: Predictions and Prophecies about the End of the World* (2008) by Sylvia Browne and Lindsay Harrison which notes the presence of a respiratory virus in 2020. Besides these two books, there is a movie called *Contagion* (2011) presenting a virus outbreak in Hong Kong. It portrays the panic that struck the global health system and the effect of inaccurate information on the public (Rahman, 2020).

The focus of the present study is a prophetic novel entitled *Songs for the End of the World* (2020) by Saleema Nawaz, a Canadian novelist, who depicts a pandemic similar to COVID-19. It is about a fictional coronavirus called ARMIS, standing for Acute Respiratory and Muscular Inflammatory Syndrome, that has started in China and spread to the whole world. Nawaz's depiction is realistically shocking as she depicts the terrifying situation we are going through now. The idea for the novel started in 2012, and she has done extensive research and revised the story between 2013 and 2019 (Nawaz, 2020, p. 351). She portrays the panic that overwhelmed the whole world starting

from the fear of death, unprepared hospitals, shortage in sanitizers, the hoarding of food and supplies to racism, conspiracy theories, and lockdowns, and how the characters begin to think of their existence while others deny the presence of the virus believing it to be a conspiracy plotted by an enemy. Through an understanding of existential concerns and Albert Camus's concept of 'the Absurd', the paper aims to examine how the pandemic threatens the characters' sense of existence, and how they manage to find meaning amid the pandemic.

Man begins to be aware of existential issues after being personally exposed to tremendous negative incidents such as accidents, diseases, death of beloved ones or worldwide events. In everyday life, people pay less attention to existential issues though some contemplate their existence. (Koole et al., 2006). What does existential mean? According to Sarb Johal (2021), "Existential usually means feelings of unease about meaning, choice, and freedom in life". COVID-19 has made people agree with Mike Martin's (1986) vision: "The real world is simply too terrible to admit; it tells man that he is small, trembling animal who will decay and die" (p. 133). Unfortunately, it awakens us to the cruel reality of life; we are existentially suffering alone. We have been concealing this fact as Irvin Yalom (1980) comments:

We are surrounded, 'at home in,' a stable world of familiar objects and institutions, a world in which all objects and beings are connected and interconnected many times over. We are lulled into a sense of cozy, familiar belongingness; the primordial world of vast emptiness and isolation is buried and silenced, only to speak in brief bursts during nightmares and mythic visions. (p. 358).

COVID-19 is the nightmare that has attacked this fake sense of stability and comfort; it has messed up with the 'big five existential concerns' which are "death, isolation, identity, freedom, and meaning" (Koole et al., 2006, p. 213).

The novel travels back and forth in time and is narrated by a group of characters linked together through an Asian woman who is said to have caused the spread of the ARMIS virus in New York City. The characters have existential concerns, but these concerns do not surface until the appearance of the ARMIS virus. Nawaz highlights the impact of the virus upon existence: "Exposure to a deadly virus had a way of helping you see the big picture, even as it simultaneously cut you off from doing anything about it" (Nawaz, 2020, p. 29). The ARMIS virus prompts the characters to reflect on the five big existential concerns.

Isolation:

Physical isolation, which has been tremendously experienced, is the motif of the COVID-19 pandemic as countries imposed lockdown to avoid the spread of the virus in addition to stressing the importance of social distancing. However, isolation, the first existential concern, means to be socially excluded or ostracized which stresses the notion of being alone in this world even if you are surrounded by family or friends. The differences in ideas, beliefs, and lifestyle make individuals “feel existentially isolated” (Koole et al., 2006, p. 214). Ernest Becker (1973) claims the feeling of isolation is “the most terrifying burden of the creature” (p. 171). Elliot, a police officer, experiences loneliness during his first-time quarantine; he is disturbed and confused: “Elliot began to feel less like the lucky one who might be spared and more like the one left behind to suffer alone - until he almost believed that succumbing to the virus might be a relief” (Nawaz, 2020, p. 19). Sarah, Elliot’s sister, also feels isolated; her parents do not understand her needs and decisions: “Back in her hometown, she would always be her parents’ disappointing daughter. The feeble-minded Bolivian-brainwashing victim” (Nawaz, 2020, p. 132). Clifford Williams (2020) states most people have a desire to form emotional relationships with others. This desire is in direct relation to the

need for particular feelings like feeling satisfied that others love you or enjoying inner comfort. Sarah emphasizes the negative impact of isolation:

Now I understand why you were crawling up the walls when you were in quarantine. And I'm not even here alone. She hadn't realized how much it had mattered to her: the affable friction of other lives bumping up against her own. (Nawaz, 2020, p. 327).

Isolation disappears when people meet those who are like them, which means experiencing the same things. This is called *I-sharing*. People have the desire to contact others who go through the same journey. When this happens, a great existential connection is established (Koole et al., 2006). Sarah establishes an existential connection with Owen Grant, a novelist who writes a plague novel, when she chooses to accompany him on a boat hoping to escape from the ARMIS virus. Though it is not guaranteed that by this action she and her son, Noah, will not get infected, it is the *I-sharing* desire she is looking for; she will not be alone. Elliot also establishes an existential connection with his kung fu classmates, and when they suggest stopping the weekly gathering as some of their classmates have caught the virus, he is afraid of isolation: "I don't know what I'll do without this, guys"

(Nawaz, 2020, p. 235). Though isolation is an important measure for the protection of people, it has a negative impact on people's psychological well-being. In brief, isolation is devastating.

Personal Identity

The second existential concern is personal identity: "A clear sense of who one is and how one fits into the world vs. uncertainties because of conflicts between self-aspects, unclear boundaries between self and non-self, or limited self-insight" (Koole et al., 2006, p. 213). People work throughout their lives to combine their different experiences to establish a stable identity and avoid confusion (Koole et al., 2006). Most of the characters have an identity problem. During college, Elliot felt lost due to a breakup with his girlfriend. So, he donated his sperms to a research center in return for money. As he is older now, he thinks "if the donations had been about more than the money. If they were about feeling some sense of purpose, something tangible, away from the swirling mists of academia" (Nawaz, 2020, p. 208). Therefore, he chooses to be a police officer; he wants to feel what he is doing is useful. He is helping his society to establish order and get rid of the bad guys. Owen is also lost; he does not know exactly what he wants. He loves Rachel, his wife, but at the same time he cheats on her, and does not want to have children believing it to be wrong to be bringing children into this

world. Nawaz says, "Most days he does not enjoy being himself anymore, now that he can no longer pretend to be the man that Rachel believed him to be" (2020, p. 122).

Another character called Emma, a singer, has identity issues that exist because ever since she was born, she was on a boat in the ocean travelling from one place to another. She does not have friends; she does not go to school. She has just her parents and a sister, Domenica. She is not connected to any place:

If there was anything that had changed in her over the years, it was that her rootlessness had deepened ... all the countries she'd visited while always feeling from nowhere, or from a place more of the mind than real- half remembered, half described. (Nawaz, 2020, p.182).

Her parents controlled her childhood; thus, when she grows up, she refuses to be controlled by anyone. As Stu, her husband, tries to dissuade her from getting a tattoo during her pregnancy, she shouts, "Stop telling me what to do like some fifties husband. You're oppressing me" (Nawaz, 2020, p. 177). Also, Stu was struggling to find his path during adolescence, and was conscious of that struggle: "I don't think anyone has a map" (Nawaz, 2020, p. 84).

COVID-19 has disturbed everyday life in a great way, and this influences people's identity. For instance, people who might become jobless are sure to suffer economically and existentially. Also, sociable people who are accustomed to being among others may suffer. In addition, those who practice hobbies suffer when they are forced to stop as these hobbies shape their identity. Moreover, people began to question their identity during the pandemic though before its start they could have had stable identities (Van Tongeren & Van Tongeren, 2021). The ARMIS virus has in some way influenced some characters' identities. Elliot considers quitting his job though he loves it, but his exposure to too many deaths and pain made him tormented. He explains to his ex-wife, Dory, "I'm terrified of becoming part of the problem ... I'm thinking of quitting the force. ... I'm ready for a change" (Nawaz, 2020, p. 310). Sarah is threatened to lose her job if she fails to persuade Owen to participate in events to speak about his novel *How to Avoid the Plague*. She asks him about his refusal to attend any events and he responds, "Because it's a matter of life and death" (Nawaz, 2020, p. 129). At this point, Sarah does not know how she is going to live if she becomes jobless, and Owen is terrified of the infection to the extent of being paranoid. It is difficult to maintain a stable identity throughout one's life. Identity is a dynamic process as one is

exposed to different factors. So, when one lives through a pandemic, his/ her identity is sure to be affected.

Freedom

The third existential concern is freedom: "Experience of free will vs. external forces on behavior and the burden of responsibility for one's choices in response to a complex array of alternatives" (Koole et al., 2006, p. 213). During college, Sarah thinks about the idea of freedom and its impact on others:

How can I be sure that something I do isn't going to turn out to be a terrible mistake? I've been so focused on my own choices, I never stopped to think about what they might mean for other people. What if I hurt someone else? (Nawaz, 2020, p. 99).

When one's freedom is in danger, an unpleasant stimulus instigates the person to reestablish and confirm his/ her freedom. People who enjoy freedom show a healthy well-being and an ability to make successful relationships than those whose actions are restricted. In contrast, uncontrolled freedom creates a sense of worthlessness and loss (Koole et al., 2006).

After the outbreak of COVID- 19, the idea of freedom has been confusing in respect to the decisions needed to be taken

during a state of influx of information, which sometimes happens to be inaccurate or misleading, about the virus. These decisions, for example, are about travelling, the safety of family or friends, in brief survival during this period of doubt and bewilderment. Many people have become perplexed as the impact of these decisions will affect both them and others (Van Tongeren & Van Tongeren, 2021). The ARMIS virus, to some extent, disrupts the concept of freedom. Keelan Gibbs, Professor of Philosophy, speaks about the troubling nature of freedom during the pandemic:

Human beings are flawed, just like our leaders. Sometimes we make the wrong decisions. That's why it's important to think carefully and consider the consequences of our actions—not just for their impact on others, but on our own psyches. This is especially true during times of crisis. (Nawaz, 2020, p. 232).

Freedom can give rise to anxiety because you are not sure if the right choice is made, and this leads to insecurity (Popovic, 2002). Owen has the freedom to do as he wishes, but he is confused: “It's the uncertainty of every action. Every choice is a threat. I don't want to stay shut up in my condo, trying to decide if a breath of fresh air is worth risking my life” (Nawaz, 2020, p.

144). New York state takes certain measures to prevent the spread of the virus by imposing quarantine which some people see as controlling their freedom. For example, Gretchen, a university professor, comments on New York's decision regarding the ARMIS virus, "First, it's voluntary quarantining, then it'll be mandatory. Then they'll be shooting people who step out of line. That's the real danger" (Nawaz, 2020, p. 207). Freedom is a baffling issue especially in times during pandemics due to its connection to the idea of responsibility towards others.

Death

Death, the fourth existential concern, is the first and most frightening thought that comes to mind as soon as we know someone has got the coronavirus. According to Koole et al. (2006), death as an existential concern refers to "awareness of inevitability of death vs. desire for continued existence" (p. 213). Elaborating on this idea, Mark Hoelterhoff (2015) considers death as an essential component of who we are; however, we cannot imagine or comprehend that one day we will die, and this feeling was stressed many years before by Sigmund Freud (1915) saying, "At bottom nobody believes in his own death ... in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality" (p. 16). Elliot begins to think of his possible death

during his first-time quarantine as he has been in contact with those who have died of ARAMIS virus: “To let Sarah know about his exposure would be to commit to the record, to confess his own mortality in a way he feared would destabilize them both” (Nawaz, 2020, p. 19). Yalom (1980) clarifies our feelings about death: “It is a terrible truth, and we respond to it with mortal terror” (p. 8).

Death concern is not new; artists and scientists have been tackling this issue for ages, and existential philosophical and psychological researchers have paid special attention to the anxiety that accompanies death (Heidegger, 2008). Paul Tillich (1980) defines anxiety as “the existential awareness of nonbeing” (p. 35). It is ‘existential’ in the sense that anxiety rises because of the knowledge that one’s nonexistence is a main component of one’s existence. To exist means one day you are not there. What causes anxiety is one knows he/ she will die. Tillich moves on to make a distinction between anxiety and fear: “Fear, as opposed to anxiety has a definite object ... which can be faced, analyzed, attacked, endured” (1980, p. 36). The person who develops anxiety shows signs of helplessness, bewilderedness besides insignificance which is due to the absence of the source of anxiety.

Anxiety and fear are connected; anxiety works towards changing into fear. Fear is to be frightened of something, sickness, ostracism, abandonment, or death. These sources of fear cause a negative feeling not just because they are frightening but also due to the anxiety that results after their occurrence. For example, in the fear of death: a person is not just afraid to die of a disease or die from an accident that will cause melancholy, but he/ she is anxious about what will happen after death (Tillich 1980). Elliot is not only afraid to die, but he is afraid of the consequences: "If he died, what would happen to Sarah and Noah" (Nawaz, 2020, p. 16)? Because of the virus, Sarah is also frightened especially after watching panic-induced on all channels: "Sarah felt a lonely feeling unsettle her stomach and quicken her pulse. She recognized it as fear" (Nawaz, 2020, p. 128). She, like Elliot, discovered "she only feared death because it would mean leaving her son entirely on his own" (Nawaz, 2020, p. 337). Owen is frightened when the ARMIS begins to spread; he is extremely worried to have caught the virus: "He wakes up with the notion of the virus still vexing him, like a sentence left unfinished (Nawaz, 2020, p. 113). As a result, he is depressed and stressed. Yalom describes the fear of death, an important emotion existing in everyone, as a ghost attacking a person's consciousness (1980). Both Emma and Stu have caught

the virus, but Stu fails to get over it; Emma is terrified: “She was still afraid. Of the sickness, of her daughter. Of living without Stu” (Nawaz, 2020, p. 292). The fear of death and the feeling of meaninglessness are connected (Leffert, 2020). Pandemics intensify feelings such as the fear of death and meaninglessness of life because people start to see the absurdity of the world.

Absurdity: Meaning

The world falls into total chaos in the presence of COVID-19. Life seems absurd. People are afraid to die and begin to question their existence. “This intense ‘fear of end’ while knowing the very obvious has been the basis of human absurdity during the time of pandemics” (Banerjee et al., 2020, p. 2). Albert Camus, a French philosopher, journalist, playwright, novelist, and a Nobel Prize winner, writes about the absurdity of man’s status in novels such as *The Stranger* (1942), *The Plague* (1947), and *The Fall* (1956) in addition to essays like *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and *The Rebel* (1951) (Panumas, 2019). What does the ‘absurd’ mean? According to Arinze and Onwuatuegwu (2020), “The word has its etymological origin from the Latin word, ‘absur-dus-a-um’, meaning unreasonable, out of place, foolish, ridiculous, discordant, etc.” (p. 530). The notion of Absurdism was derived from the European existential movement

because Camus did not agree with the existentialists' ideas and developed his idea of the 'absurd' in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) (Arinze and Onwuatuegwu, 2020). Camus explains his concept of the absurd:

I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. (1955, p. 15).

The problem lies in man's search for the world to make sense, to have a meaning, and this is not possible according to Camus.

To deal with the absurdity of life, Camus proposes three solutions: suicide, 'a leap of faith,' and embracing the absurd. To end this absurdity, he suggests (1955) suicide as a logical solution since life has no meaning: "Thus like everything else, the absurd ends with death" (p.22). However, he does not support this solution because this indicates man's failure. The second way is religious, which in Kierkegaard's view is called 'a leap of faith' (Leffert, 2020). Camus writes, "to limit myself to existential philosophies, I see that all of them without exception suggest

escape ... they deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them” (1955, p.22). Leffert (2020) discusses this remark stating existential philosophers accept absurdity by believing there is God and we believe in Him. He chooses what is best for us, and we hope for a better future despite its nonsense.

Embracing absurdity is the third solution that works for Camus. He states:

The absurd man ... recognizes the struggle, does not absolutely scorn reason, and admits the irrational. Thus he again embraces in a single glance all the data of experience and he is little inclined to leap before knowing. He knows simply that in that alert awareness there is no further place for hope. (1955, p. 25- 26).

Here, Camus explains man knows life is absurd and appears meaningless, but he/she is going to face it and discover its significance despite the suffering and hopelessness. In brief, he/she will revolt. He provides an example from a Greek tragedy showing how Sisyphus, the king of Corinth, stands up to the gods and disobeys them, and as a result, he is punished. He is sentenced to roll a rock up a mountain, and as soon he reaches

the top, it falls; he keeps repeating this action again and again. He accepts his fate, and does not commit suicide, but rebels by finding significance in his task. He meditates upon his actions as he goes down the mountain. Camus comments on Sisyphus's fate:

But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (1955, p. 78).

Camus instigates the reader to ponder upon what makes Sisyphus's struggle meaningful and why he is happy.

Most of the characters find meaning by embracing absurdity to face the ARMIS virus. The virus has instigated people to examine the meaning of their lives, and this is the final and fifth existential concern. But what is meaning? Meaning is the "Desire to believe life is meaningful vs. events and experiences that appear random or inconsistent with one's bases of meaning" (Koole et al., 2006, p. 2013). It is the main concern of human beings and is influenced by the previous four

existential concerns (Koole et al., 2006). Williams (2020) explains, “‘Meaning’ seems to mean ‘having a purpose,’ and having a purpose seems to mean ‘having something at which one aims’ – an end product of what one does” (p. 63). He believes there are four ways to acquire a meaningful life: first, one should set a goal; the goal must be essentially good, or a method to achieve good things. Second, one should be creative in achieving his goal. Third, one should help others and respond to their needs. Fourth, one should accept and give love. By examining the characters’ lives, they are able to establish a meaningful life to a great extent.

A video game designer spells out the core of the story: “People want the illusion of control. They want to feel like their choices are meaningful, even if they’re not” (Nawaz, 2020, p. 106). Elliot, a caring and lovely person, manages to create a meaningful life despite being lost for a while. He has an instinct to help others, so he joins the force to achieve that goal. He sustains Sarah by advising and approving her decisions. He does his best to save Professor Keelan, but the virus takes control of the professor’s lungs. Elliot senses the meaninglessness of life, and this terrible experience throws him off balance; he is distracted: “What had happened in the ARMIS ward was not mere rumour or catastrophizing, but death itself: ravenous,

indiscriminate, dehumanizing. Without mercy” (Nawaz, 2020, p. 343). But, later, as he talks to Julia, Keelan’s daughter, he feels enlightened and sees his purpose in life: “The relief was sobering. He could feel his head clearing, the path of duty laid bare and beckoning. ... ‘Society is still worth protecting, don’t you think? Maybe now more than ever’” (Nawaz, 2020, p. 317).

Sarah is bewildered and does not have a clear vision of her purpose in life. In an attempt to find her path, she tries doing different things such as

Quitting school to work on the farm. Running away from Living Tree. Having Noah all by herself. But it had been years since she had done anything risky, since she had managed to overcome the ever-present doubt that hung over her life like a fog. (Nawaz, 2020, p. 148)

Her son, Noah, becomes the cause of her life, so she accompanies Owen on the boat to protect him because without him, her life is meaningless: “If Noah got sick, she would cease to exist. She, who was built out of failure, could not survive that one” (Nawaz, 2020, p. 332). After Owen surrenders to the ARMIS, Sarah decides to return to New York city to be beside her family.

Owen has spent most of his life without an aim just writing novels and cheating on Rachel, his wife, though he loves her. He refuses to have children, but she insists on having one though it has been agreed upon not to have any. She is depressed and seems to lose interest in life. To enjoy a meaningful life, Susan Wolf (2013) writes, one has to take part in projects which have positive impact. Rachel has achieved success regarding her career as a university professor and is completely satisfied. She probably feels bored and wants to start a new project. Williams (2020) mentions one can experience boredom after finishing a project because he/she is not sure if there are other worthy projects to seek. Rachel's decision to divorce Owen and have a baby rises from her desire to continue having a meaningful life.

Since the outbreak of the ARMIS virus, Owen becomes paranoid about getting infected. He feels life is meaningless, but when he starts guiding people during the pandemic, he changes:

The fact that people believed in him did make him real, in a certain sense. And their confidence in his ability to protect them also gave Owen something to hang on in the aftermath of Rachel's death, during which he seemed to fluctuate between anguish and a kind of giddy heedless-

ness, as though the worst had already happened and there was nothing else to fear. (Nawaz, 2020, p. 330).

Unfortunately, he is exposed to the virus in the hospital when he takes Noah to be examined, and what makes matters worse is he forgets to wear his protective gear. Nevertheless, he does not regret his action: "It was the call of absolute duty that he had answered, and the fact that he had heard it, that he had done the right thing, seemed almost blessed" (Nawaz, 2020, p.333).

Emma struggles to find meaning in her life. Her constant presence in the ocean during her childhood made her distressed. After her marriage and pregnancy, she is afraid of becoming a normal mother who does nothing important in her view. She insists on having a tattoo during her pregnancy which could harm her and the baby, but she sees the tattoo as a symbol of her life journey:

The pain was a trip, Emma decided. It was a trip because it was realer than real. It was an overload of new sensation. It was stinging and burning, a trial by fire. She was being born again, like a phoenix. Maybe that was what life should be about - change and challenge and new experiences. (Nawaz, 2020, p. 186).

The ARMIS virus attacks her and Stu, but he fails to fight it; his lungs give up. This knocks her down, and she feels the meaninglessness of her life. She is afraid and does not know how to go on with her life without Stu. However, she discovers her inner strength by the help of her sister: “You’ve always been the brave one, Em. ... Being brave means you keep going, even when you know how bad things can really get” (Nawaz, 2020, p. 292). She calls her band and starts working on a new song which becomes an anthem for survivors of the ARMIS virus. She realizes the meaningfulness of her life by being there for others.

Edith, the ARMIS girl, is a Chinese American whose goal in life was to be famous. She believes being famous will make her life meaningful. Thus, she becomes a fan of Owen and has a relationship with him: “There is the invisible pull of Owen’s celebrity. Ed is drawn to the aura of fame as though it might catch her in its glow and light her up from within. And then, maybe, people will finally see her” (Nawaz, 2020, p. 56). Unluckily, without her knowledge, she has been blamed for spreading the virus in addition to being patient zero though she did not get sick. Later, she contracts the virus and is admitted to the hospital. She explains she hesitated to go to the hospital because she was afraid of the anti-Asian crimes taking place.

Edith finds herself in an absurd situation though she has done nothing wrong to deserve to be the target of these crimes. Debanjan Banerjee (2020) comments on the response to COVID-19, “This ‘absurdity’ has been reflected in the international ‘blame game’, the interpersonal xenophobia, the chaotic spread of misinformation and the rat-race for ‘statistical’ coverage of the pandemic numbers” (p. 2). People have gone crazy; a person online writes, “So the virus has finally landed in Denver. Three people sick, all members of the Chinese Evangelical Church. Surprise surprise. Looks like ARMIS Girl paid us a visit. What I wouldn’t give to throw her ass in jail” (Nawaz, 2020, p. 239).

Edith learns a lifetime lesson after being exposed to hate crimes:

For everyone online saying they hope I die of ARMIS, I hope you never have to learn what it’s like to wake up to find out the entire world hates you. At least my experience has taught me one thing: I’d rather be unknown than infamous. (Nawaz, 2020, p. 294).

Despite the hate crimes, she agrees to participate in tests held for the virus and does not blame the doctor who is the cause of her being called the ARMIS girl. Edith is ready and willing to help people that gives her life a purpose.

For man to find a deeper meaning in his/her life, V. E. Frankl (1985) mentions, he/she has to face the absurd, and this is achieved when man accepts fate and its adversities. As a matter of fact, the characters have developed resilience which means “overcoming stress or adversity” (Rutter, 1999, p. 119). They are strong and stand up to the absurdity of their lives during the pandemic. Selim Gundogan (2021) explains there is a correlation between psychological resilience and life satisfaction. When a person has high psychological resilience, he/she is able to endure psychological ills, and thus be satisfied with his/her life. So, the characters are able to deal with their fear, anxiety, and stress during the pandemic.

Conclusion:

COVID-19, an unprecedented calamity, strikes hard, and till this moment we are losing people despite the release of vaccines. The virus is in constant change and mutation. We are living through critical times. Nothing is certain, and fear is in the air. COVID-19 forces us to question our existence. What is the meaning of our lives? Is this the end? Nawaz's *Songs for the End of the World*, though not written as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, raises these questions. She depicts the worldwide panic that has taken over the past two years. The ARMIS virus threatens the characters' existence, and existential concerns such as isolation, identity, freedom, death, and meaning took center stage. Living through the pandemic awakens the characters to the absurdity of life, and this gives them a reason to assert the meaningfulness of their lives. Most of the characters embrace the absurd and accept their lives though it is full of sufferings and losses. They learn to find peace and comfort, and that the key to survival is through communication and connecton. There seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel soon unless we embrace absurdity like the novel's characters. We have to hold onto each other, enjoy the journey and make it meaningful despite the hardships we encounter.

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