

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In many societies of this day and this age, people often experience discrimination due to their differences in physical appearance or condition. This is particularly evident in the lives of disabled individuals, who are often reduced to their physical conditions rather than being recognized as independent individuals by the public. Their existence in other people's eyes is not shaped by their own choices, but by a society that forces an external identity upon them. This real-world phenomenon goes in accordance with Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of alienation which comes from his existentialist philosophy.

According to Sartre, alienation portrays the estrangement of individuals from their authentic selves in a world where their identity is imposed by others, as quoted, "the alienation of myself, which is the act of being-looked-at, involves the alienation of the world which I organize" (Sartre, 1943:263). Sartre's concept further explains that individuals begin to perceive themselves as objects when their identities are shaped by how others view them, ultimately leading to a loss of self. This notion remains relevant in modern-day discussions, as some humanitarians also argue that "alienation stems from a loss of identity" (Saleem and Baniata, 2014:282). Similarly, Encyclopaedia

Britannica further elaborates on this idea by describing alienation as the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, products of work, or self.

Alienation has been a significant phenomenon in Eastern European society, particularly in the context of the post-socialist transition. The collapse of socialist regimes in the late 20th century led to political, economic, and social changes, resulting in feelings of disorientation and estrangement among individuals and communities. This alienation phenomena is also reflected in a novel titled *Little Nothing* (2016), written by Marisa Silver. The idea of alienation is mirrored through the experience of the main character, Pavla, who had to face physical and emotional struggles because of her disability. Her condition becomes a source of fascination and repulsion to others, forcing her into an identity shaped by the prejudices of the narrow-minded environment around her.

Little Nothing is a fictional literary work that blends fable and surrealism. The novel is set in an Eastern European background, where it follows the story of Pavla, a young woman born with a physical condition named dwarfism. Pavla's dwarf-like figure causes her to face discrimination by the society as her appearance does not fulfill the social norms at that time. As she grows, she finds herself increasingly rejected and objectified because of another major change in her appearance, where her face and body turns into a wolf-like figure. With this form of appearance, Pavla worked as a circus performer at the carnival, where she only becomes an object of entertainment and she receives mistreatment from her employer. The marginalization that Pavla

experiences in *Little Nothing* leads to isolation and a loss of autonomy over her own life. She eventually tries to break free from all the scrutiny that she has to endure throughout her lifetime by following her instinct, running away to the forest, and adopting an animalistic way of life that supports her wolf-like figure. Silver's storytelling in this novel portrays the harsh reality of the ways individuals are alienated due to physical differences or societal norms.

This thesis is significant as it contributes to the broader discussion on existential alienation in literature, particularly through the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy. By analyzing Pavla's alienation in *Little Nothing*, this thesis will demonstrate the application of Sartrean thought beyond traditional literary works, emphasizing its continued relevance in contemporary fiction. Silver's novel uniquely explores alienation through the experiences of a disabled protagonist in order to show how a marginalized individual fights it in pursuit of her freedom of will.

Beyond literary discourse, this thesis also holds societal relevance by raising awareness of the objectification and marginalization of individuals perceived differently. Based on the fictional narrative and referencing real-world experiences of alienation, this thesis initiates discussions on inclusivity and ethical considerations regarding how society treats those who do not conform to majority standards. Furthermore, by bridging literary analysis and disability studies, the writer explores the role of literature as a powerful medium for reshaping societal perceptions of human

value. In relation to this thesis, the writer analyzes the causes of alienation and ways to fight it as experienced by the main character, Pavla, in Marisa Silver's *Little Nothing*.

1.2 Research Problems

1. What are the causes of Pavla's alienation in Marisa Silver's *Little Nothing*?
2. How does Pavla achieve existential freedom despite the alienation she experiences in Marisa Silver's *Little Nothing*?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the causes that lead Pavla into alienation in Marisa Silver's *Little Nothing*.
2. To reveal how Pavla overcomes her experiences of alienation to achieve existential freedom in Marisa Silver's *Little Nothing*.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This thesis examines the portrayal of alienation experienced by Pavla, the protagonist of Marisa Silver's *Little Nothing*, through the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy. The discussion focuses on analyzing the causes of alienation through Sartre's ideas, such as bad faith, the gaze, and existential freedom. Moreover, this thesis also analyzes the efforts of Pavla to fight alienation in order to reach existential freedom through the concepts of being-for-itself and being-for-others. Additionally, the focus of the intrinsic discussion is solely on Pavla as the main character, along with conflicts, settings of place, time, and social context used to enhance the discussion.

1.5 Previous Studies

As of now, there are no prior researches that have been conducted by using the study object of *Little Nothing* written by Marisa Silver. However, the exploration of alienation remains a critical topic due to its impact on human relationships and societal development to this day. In the case of alienation shown on Marisa Silver's *Little Nothing*, the issue is built from a combination of realistic human situations and fantasy aspects, making it rather distinctive from other cases in other literary works. Several book reviews, including Matt Bell's review on The New York Times and Linda's review on Book Obsession site, highlight the novel's originality and its exploration of alienation through both psychological depth and magical realism. Bell emphasizes on the way that *Little Nothing* successfully explores the theme of identity shaped by memory and storytelling, while Linda's review focuses on how the novel possesses a dark, unsettling, and symbolically rich storyline that explores complex themes, such as transformation and societal rejection. In contrast to these general reviews, this thesis applies Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist theory in relation to the concept of alienation to provide a deeper analysis of Pavla's life. This thesis uses existential philosophy to explore how alienation impacts Pavla's internal and external struggles, offering a more detailed understanding of the main character than the reviews.