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**Alienation and Absurdity across Cultures: A Comparative Existential Reading of *Notes from Underground* and *Parasite***

**Hamza Shujaat**

M.Phil Scholar, Department of English, Hazara University Mansehra  
[hamzashujaat821@gmail.com](mailto:hamzashujaat821@gmail.com)

**Kamran Elahi**

M.Phil Scholar, Department of English, Hazara University Mansehra  
[kamranelahi501@gmail.com](mailto:kamranelahi501@gmail.com)

**Syed Junaid Sherazi**

M.Phil Scholar, Department of English, Hazara University Mansehra  
[syedjunaidsherazi@gmail.com](mailto:syedjunaidsherazi@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

*This paper presents a comparative exploration of existential themes in Fyodor Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground and Bong Joon-ho's Parasite, two works that, despite originating from vastly different cultural and historical contexts, converge in their depiction of alienation, absurdity, and the search for meaning. The study examines how both texts portray individual and collective responses to oppressive societal structures, with Notes from Underground focusing on internal rebellion against rationalist ideology and Parasite emphasizing systemic resistance to socio-economic inequality. Through close textual and cinematic analysis, the paper highlights the Underground Man's philosophical alienation and retreat into introspection as a form of existential defiance, contrasted with the Kim family's pragmatic yet morally ambiguous efforts to assert agency within a rigid class hierarchy. The absurdity of existence, expressed through the Underground Man's rejection of logic and the Kims' futile struggle for upward mobility, emerges as a shared motif, demonstrating the inherent chaos and unpredictability of human life. Furthermore, the analysis explores the psychological and social dimensions of isolation, emphasizing the need for human connection amidst despair. By situating these narratives within the broader framework of existential philosophy, the paper reveals how both works articulate the human desire for self-definition and dignity in a world that often undermines autonomy and meaning. The study underscores the universality of existential struggles, illustrating how literature and film reflect enduring human concerns across time and culture.*

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Alienation, Absurdity, Psychological Isolation, Social Stratification, Notes from Underground, Parasite, Human Agency, Class Conflict, Rebellion and Resistance.

## Introduction

Existentialism, as both a philosophical movement and a literary mode, probes the deepest concerns of the human condition: alienation, freedom, absurdity, and the pursuit of meaning in a seemingly indifferent or hostile world. Originating in 19th-century thought and flourishing in the 20th century through the works of thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, existentialism transcends specific historical periods, finding relevance in a wide array of cultural and artistic expressions. This paper explores how existential themes are dramatized across two seemingly disparate works: Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), a foundational text in existential literature, and Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019), a critically acclaimed South Korean film. Despite the temporal, cultural, and formal differences between a 19th-century Russian novella and a 21<sup>st</sup> century cinematic narrative, both texts compellingly portray the existential crises of their characters, shaped by individual psychology and systemic societal forces.

*Notes from Underground* is often regarded as one of the earliest works of existentialist literature, predating the formal articulation of existentialist philosophy by several decades. Dostoevsky's unnamed narrator, often referred to as the 'Underground Man,' lives in deliberate isolation, rejecting societal norms, rationalist thought, and utilitarian ideals. His hyper-consciousness, self-loathing, and obsessive introspection render him alienated not only from society but also from himself. The Underground Man's internal monologue reflects an intense struggle with meaninglessness and an almost pathological resistance to conformity. His philosophical rebellion, expressed through disdain for Enlightenment rationality, rejection of scientific determinism, and embrace of irrationality, embodies a deeply existential confrontation with the absurdity of existence.

On the other hand, Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* offers a modern, socially grounded exploration of existential themes, particularly alienation and absurdity, through the lens of class conflict. The film centers on the impoverished Kim family, who infiltrate the lives of the wealthy Park family through a web of deception. While the Kims' actions are driven by economic necessity, their journey unfolds as an existential commentary on human agency, illusion, and the struggle for dignity within a rigidly stratified society. The contrast between the two families, their physical spaces, behaviors, and worldviews, underscores the systemic alienation that stems from material inequality. Beneath its satirical surface, *Parasite* exposes the absurdity of social hierarchies and the futility of aspiration in a world governed by arbitrary structures of power and privilege.

Though set in different centuries and cultural contexts, both *Notes from Underground* and *Parasite* grapple with similar existential dilemmas. The Underground Man and the Kim family each experience alienation: the former through metaphysical self-isolation, the latter through social and economic marginalization. Both engage in forms of resistance, philosophical in Dostoevsky's case, strategic and deceptive in

Bong's, against systems that deny them freedom and self-worth. In their pursuit of agency and meaning, they encounter the absurd: irrational behavior, unpredictable outcomes, and the collapse of their personal aspirations. Yet, while the Underground Man embodies existential despair in its purest form, choosing solitude over engagement, the Kims' collective struggle reveals the adaptive, often morally ambiguous dimensions of survival in a dehumanizing system.

This paper argues that the existential themes of alienation, absurdity, and the search for meaning are rendered with striking similarity in *Notes from Underground* and *Parasite*, despite differences in form, genre, and cultural origin. By analyzing these works side by side, this study not only illuminates the enduring relevance of existential thought but also highlights how different narrative mediums, literature and film, can engage with the same philosophical concerns through distinct yet complementary perspectives. Through a close reading of both texts, supported by existential theory and cultural analysis, this research seeks to uncover the universal dimensions of the human condition as explored in these two powerful works.

### **Thesis Statement**

This paper argues that Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* offer complementary yet culturally distinct portrayals of existential alienation, absurdity, and the human search for meaning; while Dostoevsky emphasizes individual psychological rebellion against rationalist ideologies, Bong illustrates collective resistance to socio-economic oppression, demonstrating how existential crises manifest through both introspective defiance and systemic struggle.

### **Research questions**

1. How do *Notes from Underground* and *Parasite* depict existential alienation, and in what ways do their protagonists respond to disconnection from society and meaning?
2. In what ways do both texts explore the absurdity of human existence, and how do cultural and structural contexts influence the characters' pursuit, or rejection, of meaning and agency?

### **Research Objectives**

- 1) To analyze how *Notes from Underground* and *Parasite* represent existential alienation by examining the psychological and social disconnection experienced by their protagonists, and to explore the ways in which these characters respond to their sense of isolation and lack of meaning.
- 2) To investigate how both texts illustrate the absurdity of human existence, and to assess how differing cultural and structural contexts shape the characters' efforts to assert agency or reject imposed meaning within their respective environments.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study holds significance in both literary and philosophical discourse by bridging two vastly different works, *Notes from Underground* and *Parasite*, to reveal the universality and cultural specificity of existential concerns. By comparing a 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian novella with a 21<sup>st</sup> century South Korean film, the research demonstrates how themes such as alienation, absurdity, and the search for meaning persist across time, geography, and medium. This cross-cultural analysis expands the understanding of existentialism beyond its traditional Western philosophical roots, showing how contemporary narratives like *Parasite* engage with similar existential dilemmas through the lens of socio-economic structures and collective experience. Moreover, this study contributes to a deeper appreciation of how different narrative forms, literary introspection and cinematic realism, communicate existential ideas. It highlights how individual and collective responses to societal pressures, rationalism, and class hierarchies shape the human experience of alienation and absurdity. By doing so, it provides valuable insights into the psychological and sociological dimensions of existential thought, offering a more holistic perspective on how human beings grapple with meaning, identity, and freedom.

Academically, this research is significant for students and scholars of literature, film studies, and philosophy, particularly those interested in comparative literature, existential theory, and socio-political critique. It encourages interdisciplinary engagement and fosters a broader understanding of how global narratives reflect and reframe enduring philosophical questions within diverse cultural frameworks.

### **Research Methodology & Literature Review**

This study employs a qualitative, comparative, and interpretive methodology grounded in literary and film analysis, with a focus on existential philosophy as the theoretical framework. The purpose is to explore and compare how *Notes from Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky and *Parasite* directed by Bong Joon-ho portray existential themes such as alienation, absurdity, and the search for meaning within their respective cultural, historical, and narrative contexts.

This is a comparative textual analysis, integrating elements of philosophical inquiry and cultural criticism. The research involves close reading of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and detailed scene analysis of Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*. These texts are examined to identify and interpret key existential motifs, such as the psychological effects of isolation, resistance to societal norms, and the absurdity of human behavior and existence. The study is guided by existentialist philosophy, drawing on thinkers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. Their concepts of alienation, freedom, absurdity, and authenticity provide a critical lens through which the two primary texts are analyzed. The research examines how these existential concepts are reflected differently through literature and cinema and shaped by distinct cultural influences, 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian society versus modern South Korean capitalism.

The primary sources, *Notes from Underground* (text) and *Parasite* (film) are analyzed through textual and visual interpretation. Key passages and scenes are selected based on their relevance to existential themes. Dialogue, narrative structure, character development, setting, and symbolism are closely examined to uncover patterns and divergences in how each work explores existential concerns. Supporting secondary sources include scholarly articles, critical essays, and philosophical texts that discuss existentialism, Dostoevsky's and Bong Joon-ho's works, and broader cultural or cinematic analyses. These sources help contextualize and support the primary analysis.

The study focuses specifically on *Notes from Underground* and *Parasite*, limiting its scope to two primary texts to allow for in-depth analysis. It does not attempt to generalize existentialist themes across all Russian literature or South Korean cinema. Additionally, while the study is informed by philosophical theory, it does not provide a full philosophical exegesis but rather applies key existential concepts to textual interpretation.

The themes of alienation, absurdity, and existential freedom have long occupied a central position in philosophical and literary discourse. Existentialist thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus have interrogated the human struggle for meaning in a chaotic or indifferent world. Their ideas continue to inform interpretations of literature and film that explore existential concerns. This literature review explores key academic and philosophical sources relevant to the analysis of *Notes from Underground* and *Parasite*, situating this research within broader critical discussions.

Existentialism as a philosophical tradition provides the primary framework for this study. Sartre's concept of radical freedom and bad faith, as discussed in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), emphasizes the individual's burden of choice in an absurd universe. Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), presents the absurd hero who must find meaning in defiance of a meaningless world. These philosophical perspectives help frame the protagonists in both texts as figures caught between external constraints and internal rebellion.

Literary scholars have long recognized *Notes from Underground* as a foundational existential text. Joseph Frank (1976) argues that the Underground Man's hyper-consciousness and self-contradiction reflect Dostoevsky's early philosophical resistance to utilitarianism and scientific rationalism. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), emphasizes the polyphonic nature of Dostoevsky's characters, who embody conflicting ideological voices. This aligns with the Underground Man's fragmented and contradictory consciousness, which resists synthesis and embraces existential ambiguity.

Recent scholars have continued to explore *Notes from Underground* through existential and psychological lenses. Gary Saul Morson (1994) highlights the Underground Man's narrative strategy as one that invites the reader into an unstable,

self-negating perspective, where alienation is both theme and method. Others, such as Robert Louis Jackson (2003), emphasize the novella's rejection of Enlightenment rationalism and its anticipation of Nietzschean critique. These readings reinforce the central idea that the Underground Man represents a form of existential rebellion rooted in isolation and absurdity.

While *Parasite* has not traditionally been read through an existential lens, recent scholarship has begun to engage with the film's philosophical depth. Critics such as Jason Harsin (2020) and Youna Kim (2021) interpret *Parasite* as a social commentary on capitalist inequality, yet also note the existential undertones in its depiction of choice, identity, and despair. The character of Ki-taek, in particular, embodies the existential struggle to assert dignity in a system that repeatedly denies it. His famous declaration that "the best plan is no plan" suggests a recognition of life's absurd unpredictability, echoing Camus' notion of the absurd condition.

In cinematic studies, Bong Joon-ho's direction has been praised for its fusion of genre with social critique. Kyung Hyun Kim (2020) explores how Bong's films, including *Parasite*, use visual metaphors, such as vertical space, light, and architecture, to depict class hierarchy and moral collapse. These spatial dynamics reinforce the existential alienation of characters who are physically and metaphorically 'beneath' society.

Comparative studies between literary and cinematic texts are increasingly valuable in demonstrating how philosophical ideas transcend medium. Linda Hutcheon (2006) discusses adaptation as a form of reinterpretation, where new texts engage with existing ideas through culturally specific lenses. Similarly, Robert Stam (2005) argues that films often reflect literary themes through visual language and collective experience. This supports the premise that *Parasite*, while distinct in form from *Notes from Underground*, can be read as a cultural adaptation of similar existential themes. Existing literature provides strong analytical foundations for both *Notes from Underground* and *Parasite*, though few studies directly compare them. By bringing these texts into dialogue through the lens of existentialism, this research fills a critical gap, bridging literary and filmic representations of alienation and absurdity, and highlighting the cultural and philosophical continuities that unite them across time and form.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Discussion and analysis on 'Alienation and Absurdity across Cultures: A Comparative Existential Reading of *Notes from Underground* and *Parasite*' is given below.

#### **1) Existential Alienation: Psychological vs. Social Dimensions**

Alienation stands at the core of both *Notes from Underground* and *Parasite*, though it manifests differently based on each text's philosophical and cultural context. In *Notes from Underground*, the Underground Man experiences a profound psychological alienation rooted in introspection, hyper-consciousness, and self-hatred. His estrangement is self-imposed; he deliberately removes himself from society to preserve his autonomy. He proclaims, "I am alone and they are everyone" (p.14),

marking a complete rupture from meaningful human interaction. His internal contradictions lead to a cycle of paralysis and inaction, as he simultaneously desires and rejects connection.

In contrast, the alienation in *Parasite* is primarily social and structural. The Kim family is not isolated by choice, but by an economic system that marginalizes them. Ki-taek's line, "We are not below them; we are beneath their notice" (00:11:32), underscores the invisibility imposed by class. Unlike the *Underground Man*, whose alienation stems from philosophical rebellion, the Kims are alienated by material deprivation and systemic inequality. Their collaboration as a family reflects a collective existential strategy, using deceit and manipulation not for power, but for survival.

Yet both texts reflect how alienation fosters despair. *The Underground Man* retreats further into his mind, crippled by overanalysis and bitterness. In *Parasite*, the Kims' initial unity eventually collapses under the weight of deception, culminating in violence and permanent separation. These outcomes emphasize the shared human consequence of existential isolation: a crisis of meaning and identity.

## **2) The Absurd: Individual Irrationality and Systemic Chaos**

Both texts explore the absurdity of existence, though again, their treatments diverge in scale. Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* challenges the Enlightenment ideal that human behavior can be governed by reason or logic. He mocks rational determinism: "Two times two is four... but what if I prefer two times two to be five?" (p.21). This rejection of objective truth signals his refusal to conform to systems that reduce human complexity to formulas. His embrace of irrationality is both defiance and despair, as he asserts autonomy in a world that expects order.

In *Parasite*, the absurdity is rooted in the socio-economic system. The Kim family carefully constructs an elaborate plan to infiltrate the Parks' home, only for it to unravel due to unforeseen chaos, a storm, a birthday party, an exposed secret. Ki-taek's declaration, "The best plan is no plan" (01:44:16), mirrors the *Underground Man*'s nihilistic insight. Both characters recognize that control is an illusion, and that life's unpredictability often renders human intention meaningless.

Absurdity in both narratives culminates in collapse. The *Underground Man*'s encounter with Liza, whom he emotionally manipulates and then abandons, reflects his inability to reconcile his need for connection with his fear of vulnerability. In *Parasite*, Mr. Kim's final act of violence during the party represents a breaking point, a futile explosion of accumulated shame and humiliation. These absurd climaxes underscore Camus' notion of the absurd hero: one who must live with meaninglessness yet continues to act, even in futility.

## **3) Rebellion and Resistance: Philosophical vs. Practical Agency**

Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* rebels through introspection and philosophical opposition. He refuses to live by the conventions of a rational society, asserting instead that human beings are not logical machines. His rebellion is not constructive;

it is passive, bitter, and ultimately self-destructive. He chooses suffering to affirm his freedom: "Suffering is the sole origin of consciousness" (p.32). His resistance lies in his refusal to submit to the rationalist worldview, even at the cost of his own happiness.

The Kims' resistance in *Parasite* is far more pragmatic. They engage with the system not to reject it, but to exploit it. Their deception is a form of rebellion against the rigid class hierarchy that denies them upward mobility. Yet their rebellion is morally ambiguous, built on lies and displacement of others. Ki-woo's dream of buying the Parks' house represents a delusion of agency, tragically shattered by the film's end. Ultimately, both the Underground Man and the Kim family confront systems that suppress individuality and freedom. Their forms of rebellion, philosophical and economic, illustrate existential attempts to reclaim meaning in oppressive contexts. However, both fail to transcend their conditions, emphasizing the futility of rebellion when systems remain unyielding.

#### **4) Human Connection and the Search for Meaning**

While both works portray alienation and absurdity, they also reveal the deep human need for connection. The Underground Man's interaction with Liza exposes his desire to be seen and understood. Yet he ruins this chance, reflecting his inability to engage with others authentically. He admits, "I long for real life, but I recoil from it" (p.26), capturing the existential tension between craving meaning and fearing it.

In *Parasite*, the Kim family's close-knit bond temporarily offers them a sense of purpose. They laugh, strategize, and dream together. However, their pursuit of social mobility fractures this bond, exposing how external pressures corrupt even the most intimate relationships. The father's eventual isolation in the basement mirrors the Underground Man's metaphysical solitude, a descent into obscurity born of despair.

Both narratives highlight that the search for meaning, while essential, is often thwarted by forces, internal and external, that overwhelm the individual. In *Notes from Underground*, meaning is sabotaged by consciousness itself; in *Parasite*, it is suffocated by socio-economic reality.

#### **Conclusion**

This comparative analysis of *Notes from Underground* and *Parasite* reveals the enduring relevance of existential themes across time, culture, and narrative form. Though originating from vastly different contexts 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia and 21<sup>st</sup> century South Korea, both works grapple with the same fundamental questions about human existence: What does it mean to be free in a structured world? How do individuals respond to alienation, absurdity, and a perceived lack of meaning? And can rebellion or resistance offer genuine agency in the face of these existential dilemmas?

Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* presents a deeply introspective account of existential alienation, where the protagonist's hyper-consciousness isolates him from society and himself. His rebellion is intellectual, passive, and ultimately self-defeating, driven by an intense awareness of life's absurdity and a refusal to submit to



rationalist ideals. Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, by contrast, frames alienation in social and economic terms, highlighting the Kim family's struggle to assert meaning and agency within a rigid class system. Their rebellion, though proactive and collective, leads to a similarly tragic end, underscoring the structural limits placed on personal freedom.

Despite their differences in form literary versus cinematic and their contrasting cultural landscapes, both texts converge on the existential insight that alienation and absurdity are central to the human condition. Whether expressed through internal monologue or visual metaphor, both narratives illuminate how individuals and families attempt to assert purpose in systems that obscure or deny their humanity. The Underground Man retreats into philosophical solitude; Mr. Kim vanishes into literal darkness. Both are left disconnected, underscoring the existential cost of failed resistance and the fragility of meaning.

By analyzing these two works together, this study demonstrates how existentialism transcends its European philosophical origins and remains relevant in diverse global narratives. It also affirms that literature and film, though distinct mediums, are equally capable of expressing complex philosophical truths. Ultimately, *Notes from Underground* and *Parasite* offer not only a critique of the systems that alienate us but also a poignant reminder of our shared desire for meaning, dignity, and connection in an often indifferent world.

### Findings

- 1) Alienation manifests differently in each text, psychologically in *Notes from Underground* and socially in *Parasite*. The Underground Man isolates himself due to inner philosophical and emotional conflict, whereas the Kim family is alienated by systemic poverty and class inequality. This distinction highlights how existential alienation can be both self-imposed and structurally enforced.
- 2) The Underground Man embraces irrationality as a form of rebellion against deterministic logic, while Ki-taek in *Parasite* faces the absurdity of trying to impose order (through planning) in a chaotic, unjust social system.
- 3) The Underground Man's rebellion deepens his solitude, and the Kim family's deception results in violence and fragmentation. These outcomes underscore existential pessimism regarding the effectiveness of individual or collective resistance.
- 4) Dostoevsky uses first-person narration to explore internal alienation, while Bong Joon-ho relies on visual metaphors, such as vertical space and confined architecture, to portray class-based isolation. Each medium powerfully conveys existential struggle in a way unique to its form.
- 5) The Underground Man fails to connect meaningfully with Liza due to his fear of vulnerability, while the Kim family's unity deteriorates under pressure. Both texts show that alienation obstructs the very relationships that could offer meaning and redemption.

- 6) Unlike the solitary introspection in *Notes from Underground*, *Parasite* presents existentialism as a family's shared struggle against dehumanizing systems, thereby expanding existential discourse to include class-conscious, contemporary interpretations.
- 7) Dostoevsky critiques Enlightenment rationalism in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, while Bong critiques neoliberal capitalism in modern South Korea. Despite different settings, both explore the universality of existential suffering under systems that limit individual agency.

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