

The Creative Launcher

URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Vol. 6 & Issue 5, (December, 2021)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on 30th December, 2021

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In Pursuit of Identity and Survival: Deciphering the Existential Concerns in the Movie *Forrest Gump*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2021.6.5.10>

Pages: 80-89

Abstract

Today, the life is full of struggles, negativity, competitions, and failures. We all need to remain motivated either by self or others. The film, "Forrest Gump", deals with finding the true meaning of the life despite facing numerous hurdles. It encourages never to stop and cry over

the past experiences. The story is about a man named Forrest Gump. He was born with disabled legs and had a very low IQ of 75. No-one could ever imagine that one day, he will be a billionaire. The film teaches, the importance of life, that it is like a chocolate box, no one knows what will come next. To get rid of all the pains, we have to bury our past and just move forward. The film depicts the importance of hard work without desiring anything out of it. It also teaches that, our destiny is the result of how we used the opportunities and never missed any opportunity. The characters of the film whether Forrest Gump or Lieutenant Dan, all are very inspiring and motivating. The hard work without any desire makes Forrest, a billionaire. He never desired of anything, but got everything in his life. This film is the beautiful portrayal of the life during present scenario. It perfectly fits in today's world and is applicable to inspire the next generations. The film, also touches the aspects of Karma-theory as mentioned in the 'Bhagwat Geeta' that we should do hard work without having any desire and this will lead to the success. Forrest's unconventional love for Jenny melts my heart. Every scene of the film depicts the different colors and shades of life. The film teaches, how to deal with the problems of life, as Forrest said, "Shit Happens". This shows that, we should keep positive attitude towards life. The phrase, "Run Forrest, Run" said by Jenny, holds a deep meaning that we should keep moving forward without looking back. After all, we are intelligent enough and it is on us how much we apply it.

Keywords: Karma Theory, Existentialism, Positive Psychology

Introduction

The film, *Forrest Gump*, is an American comedy-drama directed by Robert Zemeckis, released in the year 1994. It was written by Eric Roth, and is based on the novel "Forrest Gump" by Winston Groom written in 1986. Winston Groom is an American non-fiction writer and novelist. His works are dedicated to the cultural and historical essence of America. Many of his works, including 'Forrest Gump' deals with the background of American Civil War, World War I and World War II. According to an interview, he took almost twenty years to write this novel. In the year 1986, the book didn't work well, but when it got adapted as a film, it ranked him in the list of best-selling authors.

The film was released on July 6, 1994 in the United States, and became the second highest grossing film of the year 1994 after *The Lion King*. It is a masterpiece of Robert Zemeckis in association with Paramount Pictures. The film won six Academic Awards for Best Actor, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Visuals Effects, Best Picture and Best Film Editing. The film was a great success on the box-office. The film, *Forrest Gump*, starred Tom Hanks as Forrest Gump in the lead role. His powerful acting and dialogues resulted into enormous success of the film. Tom Hanks played the character of Forrest Gump, an innocent, born with disabled legs and had a very low IQ of 75. The film depicts the journey of Forrest Gump, which is full of hurdles and success, starting from the disability to the end, by becoming a billionaire. The characters of this film are very inspirational and can't be ignored. Every character gives a

lesson of the philosophy of life. The character of Lieutenant Dan, Jenny, Bubba, and Mrs. Gump, all wins the fight from their problems.

Forrest Gump is an inspirational movie, which deals with the principles of living a happy life. The film depicts several decades of the growing of Forrest Gump's life, which follows the major events of American history from 1960s to 1980s. These events include the Vietnam War, the assassination of the President John F. Kennedy, the popularization of Elvis Presley, Desegregation of University of Alabama, the Moon landing, the resignation of the President Nixon and many others. Forrest himself tells his autobiography to the strangers on bus stop, through the flashback seen from his point of view. Although, the director made it a comedy-drama film but, it also goes through the elements of tragedy, like the Anagnorisis, the Peripeteia and the Catharsis which follows the rising and the falling actions. The character of Forrest Gump is very interesting, he never desired of anything in his life and still achieved enormous success and finally, he finds his destiny. Whereas, the character of Jenny (Forrest's childhood companion), sexually abused by her father, is suffering from the identity crisis throughout her life. The character of Lieutenant Dan Taylor, who has a goal in his life to follow the legacy of his ancestors to die in American wars, got ruined in Vietnam War where Forrest saved him which ended him as crippled, and he lost his identity. This reference makes it an Existentialist film. Forrest used to wear braces in order to walk properly and this leads to the bullying of him. Mrs. Gump loves him so much, she never got bothered of his presence and she wanted to give everything like others to his son. Despite the fact, that Forrest has an IQ of 75, she goes to an extreme level for his admission. She always supported him and never allowed him to feel anything abnormal. Forrest always follows the instructions and the suggestions and also applied them. These suggestions are the treasury of life, which follows the philosophy. The dialogues like, "Stupid is as stupid does", "Life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get", "Run, Forrest! Run!" are the bricks of the story and the keystone for Forrest's success. Forrest never forget his childhood love Jenny, and always accepted her with the same love whenever she came into his life. The main lesson that, this film gives is to keep moving forward and not looking back. The film also deals with the Karma theory, which follows the hardwork without having the desire of any result out of it. Throughout the film, we encounter the shortcomings and the problems in life of Forrest Gump, but despite of all, he comes out as a champion of his own world, where people followed him. Forrest had lived his life king size, from the miracle of braces to the Medal of Honor, from the rugby team to the champion of ping-pong, from a soldier in Vietnam War to the captain of the shrimp boat, from a mentally disabled to a billionaire; the life of Forrest Gump is full of inspiration. The depiction of unconventional love of Forrest for Jenny, the fulfillment of Bubba's promise and saving the life of Lieutenant Dan, everything gives a lesson. The character of Forrest Gump, indirectly reaches to the highest level of Maslow's Hierarchy, the self-actualization, where a person becomes the most one can be. The optimistic attitude of Forrest makes him a champion; a champion with wings. He is genuinely a noble character, who is always ready to help and obey the orders of his seniors. After becoming the owner of the 'Bubba Gump Shrimp Company' he never had

greed of anything nor he felt proud and instead donated money to the hospital and the church of Alabama. He also gave the Bubba's share of money to his family after his death.

There is no comparison between novel and the movie, as both are at different levels. If, one is the color then, other is the shade of it. The novel follows the bildungsroman style of writing, and thus, movie depicts this. There are the fringes in the movie which lacks the story of novel, but the direction of the film is marvelous. Forrest himself is the narrator of his own story, and this is the true depiction of what actually happens in life. The writer guides the path and the director walks through it.

Existentialist Concerns in Forrest Gump

The film Forrest Gump has the essence of Existentialism. The story of Forrest tells that the human life is not predetermined; it is the result of our deeds. Forrest Gump created his destiny by his own and lived a happy life without any regret. He only chose to follow the opportunities that he got throughout his life and came out as a champion. It is not the destiny which troubles the human, but the identity that is in search and this search is to create meaning to the life. Jenny struggled throughout her life to find her identity and this shows her the worst shortcomings of life. The character of Lieutenant Dan Taylor, also gone through the identity crisis when he ends up as crippled in Vietnam War. The film shows both the worst and the happiest aspects of the life and teaches how to overcome the problems. There are many notions of Existentialism in the film that covers the principles of living a happy life.

Existentialism is the philosophy of 19th and 20th century European philosophers that concerns with the human existence and opposed the old Abrahamic religious principles. According to old Abrahamic religious principles, the human life is predetermined and it is the responsibility of human to fulfill it. The theory of Existentialism is mainly based on the phrase, "Existence Precedes Essence" which means, first we exist, then we encounter the world and then we find the meaning of life for ourselves. We are the creators of our destiny, it is not predetermined. The theory deals with the attitude of overcoming the absurdity of life and to give it a concrete meaning.

Accordingly, we are thrown into this world and it is our responsibility to find our destiny. The religious aspects depicts that, everything is already written in our destiny and we cannot change it. This hegemony is the result of our sadness and thus, ruins our entire life. The film Forrest Gump depicts the breakdown of this hegemony that we can achieve whatever we want to, by grabbing the opportunities, hard work and by keep moving forward. The world is meaningless and we are free to choose, and this freedom is the Ultimate Prize, but also the Ultimate Burden in the path of creating meaning to our life. The ultimate prize means, the freedom to do anything that pleases you. Whereas, the ultimate burden is, if we are free to choose, can we do anything we want, no matter how evil it is? There are always two aspects of everything and both oppose each other. Existentialism helps to find you and this is the key to live a happy life. The utilization of this theory should not be targeted negatively. Many intellectuals came to depict the world as an irrational and hostile place, where the main focus is to survive physically and socially. This theory, deals with the exploration of an individual

and his/her desire to create rational decisions to survive in this irrational world, like Lieutenant Dan.

The term, "Existentialism" was first coined by a French philosopher, Gabriel Marcel in the mid-1940s. He applied this term for the introduction of Jean Paul Sartre to introduce him as an Existentialist but he rejected it. Later on 29 October 1945, while delivering a lecture at Club Maintenant in Paris he admitted that he is an Existentialist. This lecture was published in his book, *"Existentialism Is Humanism"*. Soren Kierkegaard is considered as the father of Existentialism, but Jean Paul Sartre popularized it. Friedrich Nietzsche brings the concept of Nihilism that questions the existence of God, following by the absurdity of life. The philosopher Frederick Copleston explained that, Jean Paul Sartre agreed the idea that "what all existentialists have in common is the fundamental doctrine that existence precedes essence". Existentialism mainly deals with the importance of the individual, his/her choice, the authentic existence, absurdity, bad faith, anguish, being-in-itself, being-for-itself, and existence precedes essence. Jean Paul Sartre gave the concept of *"Being and Nothingness"* that follows the concept of "Bad Faith" or "Dual Consciousness", and touched the psychological theme. The desires are the result of our unconscious mind and got mixed with Ego and Superego. According to Martin Heidegger, death is the "possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all". He explained that we are thrown into this irrational world and we can only survive by performing our intellectual freedom to take rational decisions. The phrase, "I think, therefore I am" by Rene Descartes has contributed to this field. He explained; "I think that I exist and hence I have existence". The field of Existentialism is very vast and there is no end, but it covers the theory of Nihilism, Absurdism, Death of God and others. Jean Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, and others are the Existentialist philosophers. The literary works that deal with the themes of Existentialism are 'Metamorphosis' by Franz Kafka, 'The Myth of Sisyphus' by Albert Camus, 'Waiting for Godot' by Samuel Beckett and others.

The characters of the film Forrest Gump, goes through the 'Existential Crisis' as they are in search of true identity. They suffered this confusion throughout their life. Forrest asked his mother about his destiny and she told him that he has to figure it out himself. He ran almost three years of his life and inspired many others and this changed his inner soul. Although, he never wanted anything from his life but ultimately he finds his destiny. Forrest followed the phrase, "Run, Forrest! Run!" throughout his life. He used to wear braces to keep his spine straight, and it was a miracle that he start running by following Jenny's words and never stopped. It was his running that resulted into the enormous success. He saved the lives of many soldiers in the Vietnam War and got honored by 'Medal of Honor'. He played in the American Rugby team and this made him a star. He ran all over America and it increased his followers and later leads to solve the puzzle of chocolate box. The character of Jenny kept struggling with her life and died. She was sexually abused by her father, and this act drew her into the darkness. She always kept running, but could never forget her past. She had faced the worst situations, but she unwillingly gave birth to little Forrest and this changed her life. She always wanted to fly like a bird and in the end her grave fulfilled this desire. She was in the search of

peace and struggled for this throughout her life. Another character of the film, Lieutenant Dan gone through the identity crisis, as he got crippled in Vietnam War. Throughout his life, he dreamt of continuing the legacy of dying in a war and he got this chance in Vietnam war but Forrest Gump saved his life and received the 'Medal of Honor'; which filled him with negativity. Now, he had nothing to do in his life. He was a brave man and thus, never tried to end up his life. He learned to live the life from Forrest and finally got married. He also worked with Forrest on shrimp boat and slowly both become billionaires. Amongst, all the other characters Bubba is the only one who has not gone through the identity crisis. He has planned everything for his life, beforehand. He told Forrest that once he retires from the Army, he will become a Captain on a shrimp boat by continuing his family shrimp business. He also expressed his desire of working with Forrest on the shrimp boat. But unfortunately, Bubba dies in the Vietnam War and it is then, Forrest promises Bubba to fulfill his wish.

The characters of the film *Forrest Gump* had proved that the life is like a chocolate box, we cannot predict what we are going to get, but we can change our destiny. The film depicts that, they were in bad faith and unwillingly following the absurdity of life. In the end of the film, every character has a glance of victory; victory from their lives. The beautiful depiction of hurdles, success, pain, beliefs, hard work and strong will in the film, makes it an Existentialist film.

The world is full of darkness (ignorance) and to rip this darkness, we need a guide on every step towards the light (knowledge) to motivate us. Life is a great teacher and we learn many things at every stage of life. This philosophy is discussed in the "Bhagwat Geeta", which is a treasury of knowledge. It is Lord Krishna who preached Arjuna, the philosophy of life; follows the Karma theory. In chapter 2, Verse 47 of the Bhagwat Geeta, there's a shloka; about Karmas:

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्तेमाफलेषुकदाचनामाकर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मातेसङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि॥

This means, you have every right to perform Karma (actions) but not to expect results out of it. Never accept yourself to be the cause of your actions, nor be attached to not perform your duties. It also referred to the concept of 'carpe-diem'.

The character of Forrest Gump, unwillingly follows this preaching. He never desired of anything out of his life, he only kept focusing on the present. He never desired any kind of honour, thus, blindly followed the instructions of his seniors in the Army and got the 'Medal of Honor'. When he got selected in the rugby team of University of Alabama, he only followed the instructions of his coach and thus, he got selected in the American Rugby team. After Vietnam War, he came to know about his ping-pong talent, which later made him a star. Throughout his life, he only performed the actions and never desired of any fruitful results. The journey of Forrest Gump, proved that he unknowingly followed the Bhagwat Geeta and this shloka perfectly performed by him. Forrest only worked hard and never worried about the result.

The character of Forrest Gump also deals with another shloka from the Bhagwat Geeta; Chapter 6, Verse 32: आत्मौपम्येनसर्वत्रसमं पश्यतियोऽर्जुन। सुखंवायदिवाद्दुःखंसयोगीपरमोमतः॥

According to this Shloka, a noble person sees the equality to all living beings and response equally to the joys and sorrows of the life. Throughout the film, Forrest never laughs too much in the happiness nor does he cry too much in the pains, he remained constant in both the situations. Forrest accepted Bubba's death and kept his wish alive which was to work with him on a shrimp boat. He never felt proud of his success, he simply told his story to strangers on the bus stop. He had gone through many pains in his life but he never stopped. His childhood love, Jenny, left him many times. Nevertheless, he always accepted her with same love; he remained calm in the heartbreaking situations. This attitude of Forrest, teaches us that, joys and sorrows are the part of our life and we should accept both. There is a phrase, "Survival of the fittest" that is originated from the Darwinian evolutionary theory, which deals with the mechanism of the process of natural selection. This mechanism is related to the reproduction process, but what matters the most is the survival. The struggle of survival in this world was discussed by Charles Darwin. If we took it practically, there are only chances of the fittest to survive in this world.

Forrest Gump was born with mental and physical disabilities, but his journey proves that he is a champion. He not only survived the world, but also lived it by his choice. This shows that if have a positive attitude towards life, then you can achieve whatever you want and no one can stop you. The character of Forrest Gump, teaches us that we have to keep positive attitude, a strong will and lots of dare to step forward, and rest of the world is ours. Forrest was not the strongest one, but he had the courage to fight the problems of life and thus, he survived this world; nothing is impossible.

In psychology, there is "A theory of Motivation", that follows "Maslow's hierarchy of needs", which deals with the fundamental psychological and basic needs. Abraham Maslow portrayed this hierarchy of needs through a pyramid, which has three divisions- basic, psychological and self-fulfillment needs, followed by five levels. These levels are psychological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem and the self-actualization.

The character of Forrest Gump had achieved the top most level, the self-actualization. He never worried about the psychological needs, but he was worried about Jenny. He had a nice compatibility with his belongings and he wants love from Jenny. He never worried about his status, and thus, was never trapped in the materialistic world. He ran for almost three and half years of his life and he stopped running with a self-actualization. He finally found his destiny, thus, he reached to the highest level of hierarchy. According to Maslow, "What a man can be, he must be", and Forrest reached to an extreme level of what a man could be. He had achieved enormous success in his life and proved that the ultimate truth is the 'change'. These qualities of Forrest Gump made him a man with self-actualization.

The society prescribes the roles of a person that follows the cultural, social and personal responsibilities and duties. We are trapped into this hegemony of the roles by birth and we have to perform these roles until we die. In sociology, this concept is termed as the 'Role Theory'. This theory deals with the fulfillment of the social responsibilities and duties that comes from the birth. This evaluation of roles matter individually and thus, differs according to the relations; a mother, a manager and a washer man. This theory tells the status of a person in the

society and his performance on a social platform. The society had prescribed each role as a set of behaviours, norms, expectations, duties and right that a person has to face and fulfill throughout the life.

The character of Forrest Gump, fulfilled the 'role theory' properly. He had performed every responsibility and duties towards his mother, his love, his friends and his belongings. He always followed the statement of his mother, thus, while narrating his story to strangers he quoted the saying of his mother. He performed the unconventional love for Jenny and accepted the fate of not being with Jenny. He fulfilled the last wish of Bubba, by creating the 'Bubba Gump Shrimp Company'. Alongwith this, he saved the life of Lieutenant Dan Taylor and performed his social responsibilities. He did charity to the Church and hospital of Greenbow Alabama, thus, performed social duty. Forrest didn't leave a trace to point out and question him. Forrest is a social person and played his prescribed role in the society very nicely.

Conclusion

The vindication of ups and downs of life is not easy, and cannot be measured on any scale. These are the natural phenomenon and have to happen throughout the journey of human life. At the end of the day what matters is how we contributed to life and how we lived and enjoyed the journey.

The plot of the film Forrest Gump, mainly focuses on the personal life of Forrest Gump. The film depicts his journey, with all phases of development and success on every stage of his life. From the childlike innocence to people gathering around him, he taught many lessons of life. These lessons dealt with the philosophy of life, and guided for the survival in this irrational world. The character of Forrest Gump teaches that we have to keep moving forward and accept the joys and sorrows of the life, without looking back. The film depicts the breakdown of the myth that our destiny is predetermined. We are free to choose and to do whatever suit us. Thus, we are able to create our destiny. The film started with the moving of a white feather and ends with the same, here the white feather symbolizes the opportunities that we get during the journey of life. We should grab every opportunity and keep working hard and thus, we can achieve enormous success. Like Forrest Gump, how he always accepted the happenings of his life and grabbed every opportunity that he got and brought the best out of them, we should do the same. This movie is a masterpiece of direction, hence, everyone finds the reflection of their lives in the characters of the film. Every character of the film, struggled in their lives and this shows that we can achieve anything just by keeping positive attitude and not being worried about the results. This is a beautiful depiction of a common man with the political events of American history. Gautama Buddha has also rightly said: "Do not dwell in the past; do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment".

The character of Forrest Gump, never got trapped in the materialistic world of the present nor he is worried about the future, he simply followed whatever his mother said, that we have to bury our past and thus, we can move on. He accepted the joys and sorrows in his life with the same attitude and kept on moving forward. The character of Lieutenant Dan, Jenny and Bubba depicts the true happenings of human life that we are not certain about what might happen next.

The film *Forrest Gump*, had proved that it has the elements of Existentialism thus, it is an Existentialist film. The film has the theme of *carpe-diem* (Seize the Day), that follows the philosophy of life. The film depicts the implantation of knowledge from the *Bhagwat Geeta*. Practically, the character of *Forrest Gump* rejected the concept of "Survival of the Fittest", and proved that everyone can survive into this world; full of competitions. He also fulfilled the 'Role Theory'. The central attraction of the analysis of his character is that he stopped with a self-actualization, which is a big deal.

The overall analysis of the film and the characters bring us on a conclusion that, we are the champions of our own world and we are creators, preservers and destroyers of this world. *Forrest Gump* is a masterpiece and a motivational film, which reveals the secrets of a happy life without any regret. The life is all about problems, competitions, pains, learnings, failures, upliftment and success. These elements are followed by our hard work, attitude and the willingness to survive in the world. We should accept everything we get from life and never lose the Faith in God.

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An International, Open Access, Peer-Reviewed & Refereed Journal in English

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