



ISSN 2455-7544  
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

# Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Refereed Open Access Journal  
Vol.6 No.4 December 2021

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: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English  
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.6, No.4, December, 2021

## **J.P. Sartre's *Nausea* through Existentialism and Vijñaptimātra (Buddhist Psychology)**

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**Abstract:** This article puts Existentialism and Buddhist Consciousness in a close relation to explore some issues about the content and art of *La Nausea* (a Jean-Paul Sartre's novel). Therefore, characters psychological developments are clarified through the three essential contents of Existentialism: searching for the meaning of phenomena, agnostic and free nature choice. In this process, the Existential limitations proposed were resolved by the Vijñaptimātra perspective. Therefore, Sartre's Existentialism and Vijñaptimātra, can be better understood, particularly in *La Nausea*'s case.

**Keywords:** Nausea, Existentialism, Vijñaptimātra (Buddhist psychology), artistic value, compare

### **Tiểu Thuyết *La Nausée* qua Triết học Hiện sinh và Duy thức**

**Tóm tắt:** Bài viết này đặt triết học Hiện sinh và Duy thức học Phật giáo trong mối liên hệ gần gũi nhằm khảo sát các vấn đề về nội dung và nghệ thuật của tiểu thuyết *La Nausée* (Jean-Paul Sartre). Theo đó, hệ thống hình tượng nhân vật, diễn biến tâm lý nhân vật trong tiểu thuyết được làm rõ qua ba nội dung cơ bản của triết học Hiện sinh là tìm kiếm ý nghĩa sự vật hiện tượng, bất khả tri và tự do lựa chọn yếu tính. Trong quá trình đó, những giới hạn Hiện sinh đề ra đã được giải quyết bằng cái nhìn Duy Thức. Theo đó, chủ nghĩa Hiện sinh của Sartre, Duy thức học có thể được hiểu sáng rõ hơn, đặc biệt, qua trường hợp tiểu thuyết *La Nausée*.

**Từ khóa:** *La Nausée*, chủ nghĩa Hiện sinh, Duy thức (tâm lý học Phật giáo), giá trị nghệ thuật, đối chiếu

As a fundamental work, playing the declaring role of Existentialism by Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* has been studied a lot in the philosophical and ideological aspects such as time (Cam Clayton, *Nausea, Melancholy and the Internal Negation of the Past*, 2009), existentialism (Trung Thanh, Nguyen, *Existentialism Thought in Jean-Paul Sartre' Nausea*, 2009), comparing with Christian thoughts



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ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.6, No.4, December, 2021

(Carolyn Michaels Kerr, *Stomaching the Truth: Getting to the Roots of Nausea in the Work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Flannery O'Connor*, 2010), solitude (TA. Truong, *The Issue of "solitude" in Existentialism and its expression in South Vietnamese literature before 1975*, 2011). When philosophical thought is pushed in the direction of type comparison, the comparison Existential with Buddhism seems to be an exciting topic with a new perspective attracting many studies in Vietnam and all over the world. There are some of the prominent articles written by Kiet Tan (*Nausea, Sartre is wandering in front of the temple gate*, 2008), Sheridan Hough (*Would Sartre have suffered from nausea if he had understood the Buddhist no-self doctrine?* 2012), or Lifintseva T. P. (*"Sorge" of Heidegger, Sartre's "l'être pour-soi" and Buddhist "duḥkha": Ontological Foundations of Negativity*, 2013). In general, these studies have compared Existentialism with basic Buddhist concepts such as suffering, anatta, impermanence. Although Vijñaptimātra has been mentioned, there is no research focusing on specific discussion. Furthermore, this tendency often emphasizes the preeminence of Buddhist thought and does not pay enough sufficient attention to the artistic aspect of *Nausea*. Applying J.P. Sartre's Existentialism and Vijñaptimātra to approach *Nausea*, especially from the perspective of Vietnam, promises many exciting points. Because researching Existentialism, Buddhism in general and Vijñaptimātra in particular, in Vietnam, since the second half of the twentieth century, has had many achievements. Importantly, *Nausea*, in some ways, has a close relationship to Vietnam:

Then, when I decided to return to France in Saigon, all that was kept inside me – the strange faces, the construction sites, the docks along the long riverbank –were all melted; they disappeared into nothingness. And voila, my past remains just like a huge hole. (Sartre 160-161).

### **Vijñaptimātra, Existentialism and *Nausea***

Teaching depending on one's capability is the preeminent method of Shakyamuni Buddha when he was still alive, but after he entered Nirvana, his teachings dispersed and received many differences, especially the problem of There is no-self, but there is karma. Nagarjuna (150-250) used Mahayana emptiness to solve the insisting on physicalism; Asaṅga (300-370) established Vijñaptimātra to clarify the ultimate Emptiness. This foundation was later developed by Vasubandhu (315-395) and Xuán Zàng

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(596-664). They synthesized these issues into a Buddhist psychological system to analyze the nature of the mind, show out all manifestations of consciousness. An essential feature of Vijñaptimātra is to clarify the reason of anatta by thinking, analyzing in detail, to bring all things into a relationship with impermanence, suffering, and emptiness to conclude all the dharmas are anatta. The system of Vijñaptimātra philosophical arguments is so rich that people has mythicalized that its creator is Maitreya Buddha. For example, Ālaya-Vijnāna (ideation store) mentions to a broader content than the traditional psychology does. Moreover, the system of specialized words, relationships, and branches makes Vijñaptimātra become a field that requires high ability to think and expertise. As a result, it is rare to be applied outside and even inside the Buddhist environment.

Existentialism was born in the first half of the twentieth century. It carries on many opposites to push an existential being into a meaningless and irrational world. Developed on the philosophical foundation of Soren Kierkegaard's subjective experience and Friedrich Nietzsche's free choice, Existentialism uses Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenological methods to structure phenomena and their manifest. Searching for the essence of being, Existentialism transforms from epistemology to ontology. J.P. Sartre developed a consistent atheistic Existentialist philosophy by declaring that existence replaces God, and it predates essence. In the death-oriented situation of human beings, despair is inevitable; life is irrational. Men can only make history by projections. From its first days, Existentialism has been criticized because of its depraved manifestation of the bourgeoisie and a sign of disorientation of the youth. Existential agnosticism emphasizes the helplessness in the world, but the literary and artistic group have been passionate and successfully transmitted that passion to an increasing number of readers.

*Nausea* is the most famous philosophical novel of J.P. Sartre and Existentialism. Born in 1938, when the world was seething for the Second World War, *Nausea* has been spent more time talking about than enjoying because of its irrational world and anxious mood in turbulent times. In Vietnam, *Nausea* was translated in 1967 when Existentialism had passed its peak, the war situation preoccupied people with actual events rather than abstract thinking. Therefore, when philosophers kept



silent, the political class criticized it as the depraved cultural manifestation of American imperialism, the ethics class criticized its body depictions, Existentialism was extremely alienated and misunderstood. Even after regaining a high position on the literary and philosophical forum, *Nausea* is not an easy-to-read novel for general readers and even researchers. Discussing *Nausea* from the perspective of Existentialism and Vijñaptimātra can open up a new perspective, which is a less complicated reading way.

Searching for the nature of phenomena is the primary concern of Existentialism as well as most ideologies. When Sartre argued that man creates himself through a free choice, the distinction between "Being in itself" and "Being for itself" became the most critical issue of ontology. The ability to choose freely allows a subject to project his responsibilities and decisions into the world. So, Roquentin's interest in the study of De Rollebon is essentially a reflection of himself. The more he studied, the more he recognized his image in the subject. Sartre omits all details about De Rollebon's identity, actions, and personality and turns this character into a mysterious world for Roquentin to contemplate. In general, *Nausea* is the journey of searching for the being's nature through things and phenomena. It begins with the goal of recording everything and ends with the conclusion, "Now, I know it well; all-round things are just their manifestations - and behind them is... nothing at all." (Sartre 238-239). Sartre could not explain the cause of its failure, but Vijñaptimātra pointed out that it was the method. Hence, searching for the nature of things and oneself, characters in *Nausea* arouse defilement, which can be divided into six categories including (1) greed – Roquentin has a passion for sexual indulgence, wants to use sex to relieve loneliness; (2) anger – he is discontented, nasty when he is can not get sexually satisfied; (3) madness: self-learner falls in love with reason, pure knowledge; (4) lust: Roquentin is always proud, arrogant; his restless mind leads to (5) indecision, doubt; and finally the (6) evil view – the misconception makes the character suffer. The origin of this erroneous method is that when recognizing things, the being was tied in Manas (manas-vijnàna, subconscious-mind). Then, one can see nothing but himself; it is impossible to understand things and himself.



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Agnosticism is an outstanding characteristic of Existentialism. This also means a transition from ontology to epistemology. That is the human's situation when it is impossible to discover the meaning of things and penetrate phenomena. It differs from sociological determinism, which declares researching, dedication, and artistic activity are Roquentin's escape ways. Because all these activities are attributable to understanding human nature, but when the subject is trapped in prejudice, he can only go nowhere. The more he studies, the more helpless it is. Existentialism concludes that nothing can exist in this world; without God or law, everything becomes redundant, as Roquentin does, so does Anny. At the beginning of the novel, the author introduced Roquentin with a simple enough circumstance to be an easy case study. He does not have any significant social connections, "I live alone, all alone. I never told anyone; I do not receive anything, nor give anything." (Sartre 23). However, it is this liberal illusion that leads to impotence when the character tries to connect him with society, seek meaning through the outside world. As a result of this situation, the character feels nauseous with the stone, the piece of paper, the hand, the study, the lover, the memory. This feeling is getting deeper and deeper because it comes from nothing. In Freudian psychoanalysis, this is the principle of satisfaction. It means that the agnostic becomes an irrepressible repression. Indeed, there are many times when Roquentine thought he was crazy. The solution to agnostic is, of course, knowledge, or consciousness, but it is different from the way that Ogier. P spends his life reading books at the library in alphabetical order so that after 7 years he reaches the L. The proposed path of Vijñaptimātra is to go back to the roots, learn about themselves to understand that everything is leaded my mind itself. However, it is at this point that Vijñaptimātra and Buddhism are referred to as idealistic and ambiguous ones. In fact, it is necessary to understand that Vijñaptimātra is broader than consciousness. Vijñaptimātra does not deny the impact of external conditions and circumstances, but it confirms that in perception, the subject plays a very important role. Vijñaptimātra is very materialistic with Alaya: "This consciousness contains all the seeds of the nucleus of all phenomena, contains all the concepts, perceptions and thoughts of all kinds of beings." (ShiQīn 14)

The solution proposed by Existentialism is the essential freedom to choose. This point turns "being in itself" into "being for itself," that is, converting a being, which is redundant, random,



inexplicable, independent, immutable, to a subject with the capable of maintaining relationships with others, creatively, dynamically, and freely. These choices may be correct (music helps nausea, the character decides to go to Paris to write novels) or maybe wrong (music also stops working with nausea, and there is a very high chance that writing a novel is the same). So, the subject may not choose (as the way postwar Vietnamese and Western youth chose to live without aim and orientation). That essence is very close to the 8th consciousness of the Vijnaptimātra, or àlaya-vijnàna. There are many times Roquentin mentions nausea when it comes to nothingness. Nothingness, sometimes, is like a form of ending space ("dissolves into nothingness ... returns to nothingness". (Sartre 57,240)). In another situation, it is a kind of opening realm ("I am about to see them emerge from nothing" (328, 329)), sometimes, it seems "an idea in my mind, an existing idea floating in the vast realm. This nihilistic state did not come before existence, it is another being, and has appeared after many other beings." (334 - 335). In Vijnaptimātra, àlaya-vijnàna has three meanings which are namely storage, possession contained seeds, and vitality (growing, developing). They are space, object, and function. These meanings are continually transformed as a "constant transformation like waterfall water" (ShìQīn 17). Àlaya-vijnàna is the solution because it is ultimately pure (wúfùwúji). Searching things in the meaning of àlaya will help avoid delusion, hope (originated from manas-vijnàna), as when Roquentin is hugging Anny, he desires her. But when he is rejected, he realizes her face is "pale, barren, and grumpy. That is the face of an old woman, which is extremely horrible..." (Sartre 382). Clearly understanding of Àlaya-vijnàna, being can avoid discrimination, which is attracted when the eyes meet the scene – Roquentin looks at the stone, the piece of paper; ears listen to the sound – "tear the piece of paper to hear the lingering splutter" (32), aroma – nose smells – "an enchanting scent of stone slabs" (385), taste – tongues identifies taste – "Anny's bitter" (357), body contact – "wet, low-grade fever" (357) and to distinguish between things and phenomena – the constant nausea is everywhere.

Attracted by ideological value, the art of *Nausea* is often overlooked or classified in terms of form. There is no non-substantive form, and *Nausea*, as mentioned, is quite challenging to read. In the form of diary, *Nausea*'s obsessive loneliness becomes deeper and deeper than ever. This text is divided into three parts; the longest is a diary spanning 22 pages but serves as the character's life. Twenty-two



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day is an approximate number, and this time is associated with all spaces because it is from the mind, and it can be extended indefinitely. The most significant art of Sartre is to tell the story through the central image of nausea with all colors, shapes, sounds, flavors, and hidden thoughts. This nausea also progresses from a mild disgust in Roquentin's hand to his throat and extending outward, "And then another Nausea, before that, the night I looked through the doorway; and another one at the park, one Sunday, and then many more. Yet, the sadness of nausea has never been so intense as today" (Sartre 305). Because in the end, "The nausea is me myself," the nausea is the protagonist of the entire work, not Roquentin or anyone else. This type of character is rare and very haunted. Besides, using existential writing, describing phenomenology, Sartre owns many passages with beautiful words such as in describing the sun, fog, and sunlight dyed red in the window frame of a Normandy wooden villa, etc. Furthermore, the sense of visualizing abstract concepts is promoted; not only Nausea but Selfishness, Wisdom also became proper nouns, objects of contemplation (Sartre capitalizes these words). From an artistic perspective, Buddhism also has a vast literature history. However, in this article, we would like to mention another perspective of Buddhism expressed in the translation *Nausea* in Vietnam. First, the translation *Nausea* shows many features of Buddhism in the Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary class, which often used in Buddhism such as "abiding" (Sartre 17), "impossible to say clearly" (60), "generous" (359), "permanent" (392), etc. Because the translator of this work is Cong tang Ton nu Phung Thang, she is a female researcher who belongs to the royal family of the Nguyen dynasty, who love Buddhism for generations; she was a Venerable Thich Minh Chau's colleague in the process of building a famous Buddhist university and library throughout Southeast Asia - Van Hanh University. Phung Thang offers a profound and noble translation with Sino-Vietnamese word system such as "I write with a false attitude" – nguy tín (30), "complete special scene" – hoàn cảnh đặc cách (365), "a wish" – tâm ước (370), etc. They have the effect of courting sensitive topics in a very feminine, luxurious way: "We make love each other" – làm ái tình (24). This philosophical work is translated and published by a Hue girl at the age of 24. It demonstrates the bravery, cultural, ideological, and well-developed background of Vietnamese society. Looking back to the Vijñaptimātra, perhaps, this sect lacks an effective way to reach the masses. Many treatise sects have a common difficulty, but Vijñaptimātra is immensely more



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difficult because of its massive theoretical system. In general, it is necessary to define that Vijñaptimātra and all Buddhist treatise sects, in general, cannot neglect public Buddhism only to develop elite Buddhism. With that vision, art and literature are suitable paths that Buddhism has applied; the problem is how Vijñaptimātra transforms his problems. The example of Co Nong Pham's cup (ShiQīn 78-79) is probably an effective and clear one.

From a life perspective, Buddhism, in general, and Vijñaptimātra are directed towards a peaceful life, which is based on a thorough understanding of beings and things. But these conclusions do not prevent people from experiencing; the problem is that they know how to get over all entanglement and failure. So is the study of Vijñaptimātra, if being is engrossed in the analysis, the argument, examples, he is just like the Self-taught person, who wants to read all the books to serve humans. Eventually, he is got kicked out of the town for his moral violation. In that spirit, the association of literary research with Buddhism cannot be confined to the quoted content, direct evidence, or historical comparison. It should extend to the type of literature comparison. In this way, the path of literature and art to Buddhism is no longer an application or a search for similarities; it can lead to Buddhist literary criticism. In this sense, Buddhist criticism is the literary criticism field that studies the relationship between Buddhism and literature and how the transformation of Buddhism into literature takes place. This trend promises to open another path for literary criticism, outlined in the past but not yet focused, not fully aware. In the context of literary history, many political, cultural, and social tendencies have participated in, such as post-colonialism, feminism, ecological criticism, etc. Buddhism will supplement the system of topics, concepts, and tactics for literary criticism to apply and develop. On the other side, Existentialism, especially with *Nausea*, has influenced Vietnam in many aspects. In terms of philosophy and art, it is vigorously researched by the university intellectuals, such as Van Trung, Nguyen; Thai Dinh, Tran; Ton Nghiem, Le. It changed the face of literature in the South of Vietnam with its absurd world and phenomenological language. In terms of life, postwar Vietnam posed the two-sided problem of Existentialism: causing the youth to fall, lose its direction, and clearly show how they were concerned about choosing the country's situation at that time. In modern contexts, Existentialism and *Nausea* become opportunities for young people to reassess a past ideological tendency that leaves a deep

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impression. But above all, they can look at themselves in promising directions set forth by Existentialism as freedom, choosing the essence, trying to understand things, phenomena, and self-discovery. This is also the meaning and goal that Buddhism, in general, and Vijñaptimātra aim to.

In short, this article has used some prominent points of Existentialism and Vijñaptimātra to recognize *Nausea's* ideological and artistic values. This process demonstrates the pros and cons of Existentialism, which are valuable as lessons learned for the development of literary arts and Vijñaptimātra. On that basis, this article proposes to see the artistic value of *Nausea* as an essential part associated with the content, the tendency to literary criticizes Buddhism as the path of development of both Buddhism and literary criticism.

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