



A Comparative Analysis of Freedom of Expression in *Blue Hair* and *Aku*: A Sartrean Perspective

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Abstract. This study analyzes freedom of expression in the song lyrics *Blue Hair* by TV Girl and the poem *Aku* by Chairil Anwar through Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism as elaborated in *Existentialism is a Humanism* and Stuart Hall's concept of identity and representation. This study employs a descriptive qualitative and comparative literature approach to explore how each work negotiates freedom of expression differently. The analysis reveals that *Aku* presents an authenticity where the lyrical subject reclaims a socially imposed identity "aku adalah binatang jalang / dari kumpulannya terbuang" as a bold assertion of selfhood and reflecting Sartre's concepts of condemned to be free, anguish, and authentic existence. In contrast, *Blue Hair* exemplifies a gradual abandonment of authentic self-expression under social pressure, wherein the female character's act of cutting her blue hair symbolizes capitulation to externally defined norms, a condition Sartre identifies as bad faith (*mauvaise foi*). The comparison demonstrates that freedom of expression is not determined by the intensity of external pressure, but by whether the subject is willing to bear the anguish accompanying full awareness of their freedom. This study contributes to comparative literary research at the intersection of existentialist philosophy and contemporary cultural expression across different languages and historical contexts.

Keywords: Freedom of expression, Existentialism, Bad faith, Authenticity, Comparative literature

1. INTRODUCTION

Freedom of expression in literary works has long served as a site where existential struggles over identity, selfhood, and social pressure are negotiated and contested. Literature functions can be seen as a medium through which individuals articulate experiences of freedom, resistance, and the search for authentic identity. This intersection between existential freedom and social constraint is particularly visible in song lyrics and poetry. Lyrics is a subcategory of poetry that reveals their capacity to embody cultural elements and stylistic attributes that are not found in prose [1]. In contradistinction to prose, lyrics are distinguished by a style characterized by rhyme, repetition, and a verse structure.

In contradistinction to prose, lyrics are distinguished by a style characterized by rhyme, repetition, and a verse structure. Song lyrics have increasingly been recognized as legitimate objects of literary and cultural analysis, functioning not merely as aesthetic texts but as discursive artifacts that actively construct identity and reproduce social ideologies [2]. This recognition is further supported by empirical evidence demonstrating that lyrics employ figurative and poetic devices to express complex ideas and emotions in ways that parallel the expressive functions of canonical literary forms [3]. Moreover, song lyrics have been shown to reflect and shape cultural identity, encoding specific worldviews that can both reinforce and resist hegemonic ideologies related to gender, race, and social class [4].

This study applies Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism as elaborated in *Existentialism is a Humanism* and Stuart Hall's concept of identity and representation to analyze freedom of expression in two literary works: the song lyrics of *Blue Hair* by TV Girl (2018) and the poem *Aku* by Chairil Anwar. [5] posits that "man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does." Within this framework, freedom is a condition that simultaneously burdens the individual with the full weight of self-creation and renders bad faith the primary risk of an unexamined life [6].

This notion of freedom, tied inescapably to responsibility, functions as a moral compass through which authentic existence must be actively chosen and sustained against the pressures of social conformity [7]. [8] complements this perspective by demonstrating that identity, and by extension self-expression, is never fixed but always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. Which means that

social and cultural systems through which individuals are perceived actively shape the conditions under which authentic self-expression becomes possible or foreclosed [9]. These frameworks allow for an examination of how literary subjects navigate the tension between authentic self-definition and the pressure of social representations that seek to define them from the outside.

Blue Hair narrates the struggle of a female protagonist to preserve her self-expression against persistent social judgments that reduce her to the label of "dumb blonde" and insist that age demands conformity. The lyrics "so there was nothing I could do to stop / her from cutting / her beautiful blue hair off" illustrate how self-directed action can become a response to social pressure rather than an exercise of genuine freedom. In contrast, Chairil Anwar's *Aku* presents a lyrical subject who confronts social marginalization in "aku ini binatang jalang / dari kumpulannya terbang" and not with resignation but with radical affirmation, asserting an authentic identity precisely through and against the condition of being cast out. The selection of these two works reflects their shared thematic concern with the individual's struggle to maintain freedom and authenticity under social constraint, while their differing historical and cultural contexts allow for a productive comparative examination of how this struggle manifests across different literary traditions.

A methodological approach involving a comparative analysis of these two works will be employed in this study. Such an approach has the potential to offer a more expansive and comprehensive perspective on the thematic elements explored within the realm of literary composition, including but not limited to concepts of freedom, societal pressures, and the formation of identity. By comparing and contrasting similarities, differences, and connections across cultures and literary traditions, researchers may be able to identify themes that are universal and transcend the boundaries of time [10]. Comparative literature provides a framework for identifying common and specific aspects of literary phenomena, offers insight into the typological and genetic nature of literary events, and facilitates a deeper understanding of literary relationships [11]. A further benefit of comparative literature is its ability to facilitate dialogue between literary traditions that would not intersect. This process often results in the generation of new insights.

This study positions the lyrics of "Blue Hair" by TV Girl in contrast with the poem "Aku" by Chairil Anwar. The analysis explores how freedom of expression can be interpreted as an existential condition that individuals encounter across different historical periods and geographical locations. The two works in question have their origins in divergent cultural, linguistic, and historical backgrounds and thus offer a valuable opportunity to illustrate how social pressures regarding self-expression are responded to in contrasting ways. This comparison engenders an opportunity to comprehend freedom of expression in a more comprehensive manner.

Previous studies have examined related themes. In [12] analyzed freedom and responsibility in the novel *Dear Nathan* through a Sartrean lens, finding that the protagonist freely determines his own path while bearing full responsibility for its consequences. Also in [13] explored existential freedom in the context of the childfree lifestyle in the novel *Ours*, concluding that the protagonist's choice generates both freedom and alienation under social pressure. In the domain of poetry, research in [14] examined individual freedom in Chairil Anwar's poetry through a sociological approach, revealing that freedom is always shaped and constrained by social context. Furthermore, [15] analyzed the connotative meanings in *Blue Hair*, finding that blue hair functions as a symbol of freedom and self-identity, with its cutting understood as a loss of self and an accommodation to social pressure.

A notable gap in the existing research is the lack of a direct comparison between these two works from an existentialist perspective and Hall's theory of representation. Previous studies have examined a single work from a single perspective; therefore, a comparison of the works focusing on the differing existential responses to social pressure has not yet been conducted.

The objective of this study is therefore to analyze and compare how freedom of expression is represented in *Blue Hair* by TV Girl and *Aku* by Chairil Anwar. To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How is freedom of expression represented in *Blue Hair* by TV Girl and *Aku* by Chairil Anwar?
2. What does the contrasting existential outcome of the two works reveal about freedom of expression under social pressure?

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method using a comparative literature approach [16]. Qualitative descriptive research is a method that describes and explains phenomena or social conditions through the careful interpretation of data and making it particularly well-suited for literary analysis that requires sustained engagement with textual meaning [17]. The discipline of comparative literature involves

the analysis of two works from disparate countries. As Remak states in [18] comparative literature is the study of literature beyond the boundaries of a single country and the study of the relationships between literature and other fields of knowledge and belief. These include the arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, architecture, and music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g., political economy, sociology), science, and religion, amongst others. The field of comparative literature is defined as the process of comparing the literary traditions of one nation with those of another, and of integrating literary analysis with other fields of enquiry to provide a comprehensive understanding of human expression. Comparative literature inherently demands a worldwide perspective, an open mode, a multiculturalist ideal, and a systematic approach which is both identifying the commonalities of human experience and mapping the cultural specificities that distinguish one literary tradition from another [19].

[20] further defines comparative literature as the study of texts across cultures, describing it as an interdisciplinary pursuit concerned with the patterns of connection in literature across both time and space, beginning with the desire to move beyond the boundaries of a single subject area and to follow up what appear to be similarities between texts and authors from different cultures.

2.2 Data Collection

The data in this study consists of the lyrics to the song *Blue Hair* by TV Girl and the poem *Aku* by Chairil Anwar. The data collection technique that will be used is archival. Archival is the process of collecting data based on existing archives. Archival research involve the collection of already produced materials pertaining to a research question, and their examination and interpretation in light of that question, drawing on a broad range of materials including public documents [21].

2.3 Analytical Framework

The data analysis draws on the theoretical framework of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism and the theory of identity and representation developed by Stuart Hall. These two frameworks function as analytical categories for interpreting how freedom of expression is represented in both texts.

2.4 Data Analysis

The analysis for this study was conducted in several stages. Firstly, the researcher conducted a *close reading* of the lyrics to "Blue Hair" and the poem "Aku" in order to produce interpretations based on the content of the text and to understand the overall meaning of each work [22]. This approach is particularly valuable in literary studies, where revitalizing close reading enables researchers to recover interpretive depth that surface-level readings may overlook [23]. Secondly, the researcher selected lines and stanzas directly related to the themes of freedom, social pressure, and identity. These are the parts representing patterns relevant to the research objectives, i.e. "*patterns pertinent to the research objectives*" [24]. Thirdly, the selected sections were then interpreted through the concepts of Sartre and Hall in order to identify the responses emerging in each work. The fourth stage of the research process entailed a comparative analysis of the interpretations of the two works, with the objective of identifying both similarities and differences in their responses to social pressure. Finally, the researcher arrives at conclusions regarding the conditions that determine whether freedom of expression is maintained or relinquished.

2.5 Validity and Research Ethics

Each interpretation is founded upon extracts from the lyrics and verses. The results of the interpretation process are reinforced in two distinct ways. Firstly, the text is analysed from multiple perspectives using two theoretical frameworks, those of Sartre and Hall. Secondly, the researchers engaged in collaborative discourse.

This study does not involve human subjects or respondents. The data utilised in this study consists of published works that are freely accessible to the public, specifically the lyrics of the song "Blue Hair" and the poem "Aku". The researcher has cited these two works in accordance with the principles of academic integrity, acknowledging the contributions of the creators and respecting their copyrights.

3. FINDINGS

This study focuses on the similarities between the lyrics of TV Girl's song *Blue Hair* and Chairul Anwar's poem *Aku*, both of which explore the theme of freedom. *Blue Hair* is a song by TV Girl, an indie pop band formed in San Diego, California, in 2010. The lyrics tell the story of a female character who chooses to shed her identity as a blue-haired figure by dyeing her hair blonde in order to be accepted by

society. The story is narrated by a third-person male character. The male narrator cannot restrain the woman because he realises that everyone possesses their own freedom. The lyrics broadly aim to demonstrate that everyone has the right to express their freedom without being bound by anything.

In the poem *Aku*, the first-person narrator does not want to be bound by anything during that era of independence. *Aku* simply wants to be a free individual and dare to be oneself. The poet behind this poem, Chairil Anwar, was born on 26th of July 1922 and lived during the colonial era. His works are marked by themes of resistance and freedom from that time, as seen in the poem '*Aku*' in this study.

Table 1. Lyrical Analysis and Findings in *Blue Hair* and *Aku*

Work	Lyrics/Stanza	Findings
<i>Blue Hair</i> by TV Girl	She asked me how to be funny	The character sought a personal quality from an external source.
	But that's not something you can teach	
	She's getting older	Social pressure was framed as inevitable; "gotta" implied no alternative.
	I guess she's gotta cut her blue hair off	
	There's really no way to winning	A fixed stereotype was imposed regardless of the character's actions.
	If in their eyes you'll always be a dumb blonde	
	And she cried over nothing	The character cut her blue hair; "nothing" was repeated to stress powerlessness.
	So there was nothing I could do to stop	
	Her from cutting	
	Her beautiful blue hair off	
<i>Aku</i> by Chairil Anwar	And I guess I'll just miss her	The narrator felt loss despite no physical departure.
	Even though she isn't even really gone	
	But things are just different	The cutting signified a clear before-and-after divide.
	Ever since she cut her blue hair off	
	Kalau sampai waktuku	The narrator refused all outside persuasion from the opening lines.
	'Ku mau tak seorang'kan merayu	
	Tidak juga kau	The narrator defined himself as a wild outcast (<i>binatang jalang</i>) without regret.
	Aku ini binatang jalang	
	Dari kumpulannya terbuang	Physical threat was accepted yet did not alter the narrator's course.
	Biar peluru menembus kulitku	
	Aku tetap meradang menerjang	
	Dan aku akan lebih tidak peduli	Indifference deepened; the closing line affirmed an unyielding sense of self.
	Aku mau hidup seribu tahun lagi	

The findings revealed that in *Blue Hair*, the character's self-expression gradually diminished under social pressure with culminating in the cutting of her blue hair. In *Aku*, the narrator maintained and strengthened his stance of independence from the opening stanza through to the closing line. These contrasting patterns are examined further in the discussion section.

Freedom of Expression in *Blue Hair* by TV Girl

"She asked me how to be funny / But that's not something you can teach"

The opening lyrics established the female character as someone who sought a personal quality from an external source. Rather than defining herself from within, she looked outward for an attribute she wished to possess. This marked the starting point of her existential struggle, in which her freedom as a self-defining subject had not yet been fully actualized.

"She's getting older / I guess she's gotta cut her blue hair off"

The second lyrics presented social pressure as an established inevitability rather than a choice. The word "gotta" implied that the female character had no alternative but to conform to age-based social

expectations. Her freedom of expression was increasingly framed as something that had to be surrendered as a natural consequence of growing older.

"There's really no way to winning / If in their eyes you'll always be a dumb blonde"

The third lyrics revealed that the female character was assigned a fixed stereotype by those around her. The label "dumb blonde" functioned as an externally imposed identity that reduced her to a static category regardless of her actions. By framing her situation as unwinnable, she began to treat social pressure as an inescapable condition rather than something she retained the freedom to resist.

"And she cried over nothing / So there was nothing I could do to stop / Her from cutting / Her beautiful blue hair off"

The fourth lyrics marked the culmination of the female character's surrender to social pressure. Her tears appeared unwarranted to the narrator, yet they reflected a state of deep internal conflict. The repetition of "nothing" underscored a pervasive sense of powerlessness, and the act of cutting her blue hair signified the moment her authentic self-expression was relinquished in favor of conformity.

"And I guess I'll just miss her / Even though she isn't even really gone"

The fifth lyrics presented a paradox in which the narrator expressed a sense of loss for someone who had not physically departed. Although the female character remained physically present, the narrator perceived her as fundamentally changed. The cutting of her blue hair marked an existential transformation.

"But things are just different / Ever since she cut her blue hair off"

The closing lyrics confirmed that a clear transformation had taken place in the female character's sense of self. The word "different" signified a fundamental shift in her existential project. The cutting of her blue hair functioned as a decisive before-and-after moment, marking the point at which her authentic identity was permanently altered.

Freedom of Expression in *Aku* by Chairil Anwar

"Kalau sampai waktuku / 'Ku mau tak seorang'kan merayu / Tidak juga kau"

The opening stanza established the narrator as a subject who fully acknowledged his freedom and refused any form of external interference. From the very first line, he closed every possibility of outside influence over how he defined and expressed himself. This marked the starting point of an existential stance in which self-determination was asserted as an unconditional commitment.

"Aku ini binatang jalang / Dari kumpulannya terbuang"

The second stanza revealed the narrator's conscious act of self-definition through the metaphor of a wild animal. He identifies himself as *binatang jalang* which is an identity on his own terms rather than accepting one imposed by the social order. His expulsion from the community was presented without regret or apology, signifying that he fully accepted the consequences of his choice as an inseparable part of his authentic existence.

"Biar peluru menembus kulitku / Aku tetap meradang menerjang"

The third stanza demonstrated that the narrator's commitment to his authentic existence persisted even in the face of physical threat. The word *biar* indicated that he had already accepted the possibility of being shot and chose to proceed regardless. Physical danger did not alter his course but instead became the condition in which his freedom was most forcefully expressed.

"Dan aku akan lebih tidak peduli / Aku mau hidup seribu tahun lagi"

The closing stanza confirmed that the narrator's indifference toward social pressure had grown stronger rather than diminished by the end of the poem. The word *lebih* indicated a progressive deepening of his detachment from external expectations. His declaration to live for a thousand more years functioned as a final assertion of selfhood.

4. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to analyze and compare how freedom of expression appears in the song lyrics *Blue Hair* by TV Girl and the poem *Aku* by Chairil Anwar by using Sartre's concept of condemned to be free and Hall's theory of cultural identity and representation. The findings show that both works deal with the

same fundamental condition of human freedom, but the characters in each work respond to it in very different ways. The female character in *Blue Hair* starts with an authentic expression of herself but gradually gives in to social pressure, ending in a state of bad faith. The narrator in *Aku*, on the other hand, holds firmly to his freedom from beginning to end, growing stronger in his self-expression with each stanza. This difference between the two works is the central finding of this study, and it reveals something about what makes freedom of expression succeed or fail in the face of social pressure.

The first finding of this study indicates that the female protagonist in *Blue Hair* experiences a gradual erosion of her authentic self-expression as a result of persistent social pressure, ultimately culminating in a state of *bad faith*. Her blue hair functions as a concrete representation of the self-defined identity she has independently constructed. Nevertheless, the prevailing social representational system repeatedly invalidates her self-expression through the reductive label of "dumb blonde" and the assumption that age imposes inherent limitations on one's capacity for free expression, thereby progressively narrowing the space available for authentic self-articulation. This is consistent with Hall's assertion that identity is always constituted within, rather than outside of, a system of representation; consequently, when that system refuses to recognize a self-defined identity as legitimate, the subject's very capacity to sustain authentic self-expression is simultaneously undermined. Within Sartre's existentialist framework, this condition arises from a choice made by the subject herself when the weight of social pressure renders the full exercise of freedom too burdensome to bear which means a condition that carries an ontological dimension, wherein bad faith does not merely describe a conscious decision but determines the very way in which the subject comes to perceive and define herself [25].

This finding extends the work of [15], who identified the cutting of the blue hair as a moment of identity loss driven by social pressure, by offering a deeper theoretical account of *why* and *how* that loss occurs within the Sartrean framework. Furthermore, [26] demonstrate that social pressures suppressing individual self-expression constitute a universal existential condition that manifests across works from vastly different cultural backgrounds, thereby situating the present finding within a broader comparative literary conversation. Freedom offered by existentialism simultaneously opens possibilities for authenticity and self-creation while generating the risk of bad faith, wherein individuals deny their own freedom in order to evade the responsibility that accompanies it [27].

The narrator in the poem *Aku* consistently maintains his freedom of expression from the beginning to the end of the poem, demonstrating what authenticity looks like when one genuinely accepts full responsibility for his freedom. The narrator is cast out from his community, faces physical threat, and operates within a colonial ecosystem that suppresses individual expression. Yet none of these conditions prevent him from continuing to define himself on the basis of his own choices. Each part of the poem reflects a progressive affirmation of identity from rejecting external influence, referring to himself as a wild animal, pressing forward even after being pierced by a bullet, to declaring his desire to live for a thousand more years. These are the embodiments of *authenticity* as present in the poem *Aku*. Identity formation within postcolonial contexts is inherently political and deeply personal, as writers frequently present protagonists who grapple with questions of selfhood and alienation while navigating between colonial legacies and postcolonial realities [28].

The narrator of *Aku* also exemplifies precisely this condition as one who actively reclaims his identity as a self-defined project that refuses to be determined by external forces. This is further illuminated by [29], who demonstrates through a comparative existential reading that a literary subject's repeated encounters with suffering and external pressure can function as catalysts for self-realization rather than sources of collapse, illustrating that identity is not a fixed state but a dynamic process shaped by lived experience and individual choice.

Freedom is always shaped and constrained by the social environment in which the subject operates, as the exercise of existential freedom inevitably unfolds in tension with the structural and representational pressures that surround the individual [30]. However, this study demonstrates that the narrator of *Aku* responds to such constraints with a sense of freedom that grows stronger each time pressure bears down upon him. Within Sartre's framework, this distinction allows us to see that it is precisely how one responds to social pressure that determines whether one's freedom of expression endures or collapses. [31] demonstrate that characters in non-Western works confronting cultural and social pressures remain capable of constructing existential projects by transforming those pressures into a point of departure for the affirmation of selfhood. This positions the narrator of *Aku* as an existential subject who claims his marginal condition as an inseparable part of his free existence.

Furthermore, [32] assert that narratives born from contexts of colonial oppression possess a distinctly subversive capacity, wherein such narratives construct alternative spaces for identity formation that refuse

to be defined by dominant structures of power. This position, as embodied by the narrator of *Aku*, constitutes an existential act that transcends the historical boundaries of its own creation.

The comparison between the two works in this study directly addresses the original objective of examining how freedom of expression manifests in two works originating from distinctly different cultural and historical backgrounds. The analysis demonstrates that both works can be understood as expressions of the same existential condition as described by Sartre. This finding is consistent with what [12]-[13] found in their studies of Indonesian literary works using Sartre's framework that existential freedom is always accompanied by full responsibility for the choices one makes. This is further reinforced by [33], who demonstrate through a Sartrean reading of contemporary literary fiction that authentic existential freedom must always incorporate responsibility and an awareness of social context.

Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that Sartre's framework alone is insufficient to explain why, under the same existential condition, one character chooses authenticity while the other falls into bad faith. Hall's theory explains why some individuals exercise their freedom authentically while others do not. Both characters are responsible for their respective choices, as Sartre insists, yet the social and representational environment in which those choices are made differs fundamentally between the two works.

The female protagonist in *Blue Hair* faces a social environment that labels her as the other and refuses to recognize her authentic self-expression as legitimate. Song lyrics constitute discursive artifacts that actively construct identity and reproduce dominant ideology [34], which means that the pressure experienced by the protagonist of *Blue Hair* is a product of a representational system operating within the social and cultural context of contemporary America. In contrast, the narrator of *Aku* operates within a colonial ecosystem that he actively resists and rejects through the very language of his poetry. The representation of cultural identity in literary texts is constructed differently depending on the cultural context in which a work is produced [35], such that the divergent responses of both characters to social pressure cannot be separated from the differences in the representational systems that shape the context of each respective work.

In summary, the findings of this study show that freedom of expression in literature is not simply a matter of having freedom or not having it. It is a continuing process of choosing between authentic self-definition and giving in to the ease of bad faith. The comparison of *Aku* and *Blue Hair* confirms that what matters most is not how much social pressure a person faces, but whether they are willing to carry the weight of full awareness of their own freedom and responsibility. This finding connects with and builds on existing research on Sartre's existentialism in literary contexts, while also pointing to new directions for future research into how social and representational systems shape the conditions under which authentic self-expression is possible.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined how freedom of expression depicted in *Blue Hair* by TV Girl and *Aku* by Chairil Anwar through Sartre's existentialist framework and Hall's concept of identity and representation. The findings demonstrate that both works engage with the same existential condition of being condemned to be free, yet their subjects respond in contrasting ways: the narrator of *Aku* confronts social marginalization with radical affirmation and authentic self-definition, while the female protagonist of *Blue Hair* gradually yields to social pressure, culminating in *bad faith*. The decisive factor in freedom of expression is not the intensity of external pressure but whether the subject is willing to bear the existential anguish that accompanies full acknowledgment of freedom and responsibility. This study contributes methodologically to comparative literature by demonstrating that a combined Sartrean and Hall's framework offers a productive lens for examining existential themes across culturally and historically distant texts. It also carries pedagogical implications, suggesting that cross-cultural literary comparison can serve as an effective approach for teaching existentialist philosophy in contexts where students engage with both Western and non-Western literary traditions. Nevertheless, this study is limited to two works and focuses exclusively on lyrical texts. Future research may therefore expand the scope by incorporating additional works from diverse cultural backgrounds or integrating other philosophical frameworks to enrich the comparative analysis of freedom and self-expression in literature.

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