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Existential Loneliness, Responsibility, and the Search for Meaning in K. O'Neill's *The Moth Keeper*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how existential loneliness, responsibility, and the search for meaning are represented in K. O'Neill graphic novel The Moth Keeper (2023). The study focuses on Anya's decision to become a Moth Keeper, the solitude required by this role, and the effects of that responsibility on her sense of self and relationships. It adopts a qualitative literary analysis with descriptive content analysis. The primary data consist of dialogues, internal reflections, narrative episodes, character interactions, and visual elements selected from the graphic novel. The analysis uses Moustakas's (1961) account of existential loneliness as a conceptual foundation and examines three analytical dimensions: self-isolation, existential uncertainty, and the search for meaning. The findings show that Anya's loneliness is represented through her familiarity with solitude, her reluctance to disclose emotional difficulties, and her reduced participation in social interactions. Her questions about the lantern, her existence, and the darkness reveal uncertainty about her identity and the purpose attached to her chosen role. At the same time, her wish to become "a light for others" indicates an effort to locate meaning through service to the community. The narrative also presents a tension between communal responsibility and personal well-being: Anya's commitment supports the village, but the demands of the role limit her opportunities for connection and self-care. The graphic novel's dialogue and visual composition work together to convey this tension, showing that existential loneliness involves more than physical separation. It concerns the individual's effort to understand personal identity, sustain relationships, and negotiate responsibility while seeking meaning.

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1. Introduction

Graphic novels can represent psychological conflict through the interaction of dialogue, narrative sequence, and visual composition. K. O'Neill's The Moth Keeper (2023) , published by Random House Graphic, follows Anya, a young member of a nocturnal village who becomes the guardian of lunar moths needed for the annual blooming of the Night-Lily. The position is essential to the village, yet it requires the keeper to remain alone in the desert at night. The narrative presents Anya's desire to prove her worth and express gratitude to her community, while also showing the personal cost of fulfilling this role (O'Neill, 2023). The contrast between communal service and prolonged solitude makes the graphic novel a suitable text for examining how responsibility shapes a character's experience of separation, self-understanding, and purpose.

The concept of existential loneliness formulated by Moustakas (1961) is central to this study. Moustakas describes existential loneliness as an unavoidable part of human existence that emerges from the awareness of being human and the experiences of change, suffering, separation, and mortality. Unlike ordinary loneliness, existential loneliness is connected to a deeper awareness of the individual's existence and the realization that certain aspects of life must be faced alone (Abeyta & Juhl, 2023; Anyan & Hjemdal, 2022). Moustakas emphasizes that human beings experience moments in which they confront their own existence, choices, uncertainty, and personal experiences without being able to completely depend on others. In this study, existential loneliness is examined through three characteristics: self-isolation, existential uncertainty, and search for meaning. The study also considers three reasons behind existential loneliness, namely feeling disconnected from the world, unclear life direction, and experience of loss and separation. These concepts provide a framework for examining how Anya's loneliness is represented through her behavior, decisions, interactions, and experiences throughout the narrative.

Several previous studies have discussed existential loneliness and related forms of loneliness in literary and narrative works. King & Hicks (2021), focusing on reciprocal care and the relationships experienced by the characters. Their study provides an understanding of Anya's relationships and the importance of care within the narrative, but it does not specifically examine Anya's experience through the concept of existential loneliness. Gallagher (2023) in *A Critique of Existential Loneliness*, discusses existential loneliness as a distinctive form of loneliness connected to the human condition and examines how it differs from other forms of loneliness.

Meanwhile, Zhao et al. (2026), in their study *e*xamine existential loneliness, existential isolation, and general loneliness in relation to depressive symptoms, demonstrating the importance of distinguishing existential loneliness from other forms of loneliness. These studies provide useful perspectives for understanding existential loneliness, but they do not specifically explore how existential loneliness is represented through Anya's behavior, choices, and experiences in *The Moth Keeper.*

Graphic novels communicate narrative meaning through the interaction of verbal and visual modes. Research on comics has examined how focalization, point of view, panel framing, and page layout guide readers' interpretation of characters and events (Cohn et al., 2023; Forceville, 2023; Wildfeuer et al., 2023). Studies of graphic memoir and multimodal narrative also show how images, sequence, and other visual materials shape the representation of perspective and identity (Abas, 2023; Hamlyn-Harris, 2023; Lehtonen & Putkonen, 2023). In *The Moth Keeper*, Anya's statements about darkness and light appear alongside panels that place her alone in nighttime landscapes, show her holding a lantern, or

present close views of her face. These verbal and visual cues make it possible to examine how the narrative presents responsibility as both a contribution to the community and a source of personal separation. The studies reviewed here address existential loneliness, meaning, or visual narrative, while the present article examines their intersection through Anya's responsibility as a Moth Keeper. The study addresses two questions. First, how does *The Moth Keeper* represent existential loneliness through Anya's self-isolation, existential uncertainty, and search for meaning? And second, how does her responsibility for protecting the lunar moths shape her relationships and her understanding of herself?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Existential loneliness and Its Characteristics

According to Moustakas (1961) Existential loneliness is an unavoidable part of human existence because every individual must experience certain aspects of life personally. Moustakas describes existential loneliness through the awareness of major experiences in human life, including change, suffering, birth, and death. These experiences can make individuals aware of the limitations of human relationships and the fact that no one can completely share or experience another person's existence. McKenna-Plumley et al. (2023) explains existential loneliness as a fundamental human experience that arises from an individual's awareness of their existence. This awareness reflects the fact that although people can interact with others, certain aspects of life must still be experienced individually. Therefore, existential loneliness refers to a deep awareness of being alone in facing certain aspects of existence, rather than simply being physically separated from other people (Gil Álvarez et al., 2026).

Existential loneliness can be understood through three main characteristics: The first characteristic of existential loneliness is Self-Isolation. Self-isolation refers to an individual's tendency to distance themselves from social interactions and reduce their involvement with others, which may occur due to emotional difficulties, personal circumstances, or discomfort in social situations (Borawski, 2022a). Individuals who experience self-isolation may spend more time alone and reduce their participation in social activities, which can increase emotional distance and reduce opportunities to maintain meaningful connections with others (Borawski, 2022b; Noone & Yang, 2022).

The second characteristic of existential loneliness is Existential Uncertainty. Existential uncertainty refers to an individual's awareness that life is unpredictable and that complete certainty cannot always be achieved because individuals cannot fully predict the future, control every situation, or determine every outcome of their decisions (Luhmann et al., 2023). This condition may create doubt, insecurity, and confusion, particularly when individuals face important decisions that influence how they understand themselves, their choices, and their existence.

The third characteristic of existential loneliness is Search for Meaning. Search for meaning refers to an individual's process of seeking purpose, understanding the reason behind their existence, and discovering their place in the world, which becomes especially important when individuals experience suffering, uncertainty, or difficult situations (Schnell & Danbolt, 2023). Through this process, individuals reflect on their experiences, personal struggles, and goals to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and find meaning in their existence (Pinel et al., 2022).

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative literary analysis and uses descriptive content analysis to examine the representation of existential loneliness, responsibility, and the search for meaning in K. O'Neill's The Moth Keeper (2023). This approach is appropriate because the research examines how meaning is constructed through narrative events, character behavior, dialogue, internal reflection, and visual composition rather than measuring variables or testing causal relationships. The analysis is interpretive: it identifies relevant textual and visual evidence, classifies the evidence according to the analytical dimensions, and interprets the evidence within the context of the complete narrative. loneliness, responsibility, separation, and the search for meaning in her chosen path. This interpretive method allows for a deeper understanding of how *The Moth Keeper* conveys Anya's experience of existential loneliness through narrative and visual representation, particularly through her tendency to withdraw from others, uncertainty about her responsibilities, and desire to find meaning by becoming useful to those around her.

3.2 Data Source

The primary source is the graphic novel *The Moth Keeper*, written and illustrated by K. O'Neill and published by Random House Graphic on March 7, 2023. The print edition used for the bibliographic description contains 288 pages and is classified as a fantasy graphic novel for middle-grade readers (O'Neill, 2023). The entire volume was read and treated as the research corpus; the study did not select a subset of chapters. Because the analysis uses page- and panel-based units rather than chapter-based sampling, the data were selected from narrative episodes across the complete volume.

The dataset consists of ten textual-visual units presented as Data 1–10 in the Results and Discussion section. These units are located on pages 18, 66, 70, 81, 82, 101, 102, and 130 of the graphic novels. They were selected purposively because they contain direct or contextual evidence related to Anya's acceptance of the Moth Keeper role, separation from others, self-isolation, existential uncertainty, or search for meaning. The primary data include dialogue, internal reflection, narrative descriptions, character interactions, and visual panels. The visual elements considered include facial expressions, body posture, spatial distance, panel framing, the contrast between darkness and light, and Anya's placement within the landscape. Moustakas (1961) work is retained as the foundational theoretical source for existential loneliness. The graphic novel itself remains the primary source for all plot descriptions, quotations, and visual observations.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis followed five steps. First, the researcher read the complete graphic novel to understand the narrative sequence, Anya's character development, and the social context of the Moth Keeper role. Second, dialogue, internal reflections, narrative passages, interactions, and panels relevant to the research questions were identified and recorded with their page references. Third, the ten selected units were classified under self-isolation, existential uncertainty, and the search for meaning; each unit was also examined for its connection to responsibility and interpersonal relationships. Fourth, the verbal evidence was interpreted together with the accompanying visual elements and checked against the surrounding narrative to avoid interpretations based on isolated quotations or images. Finally, the findings were synthesized to explain how the graphic novel represents the relationship between

existential loneliness, communal responsibility, and the search for meaning. The categories were used as interpretive tools and were not treated as psychological diagnoses

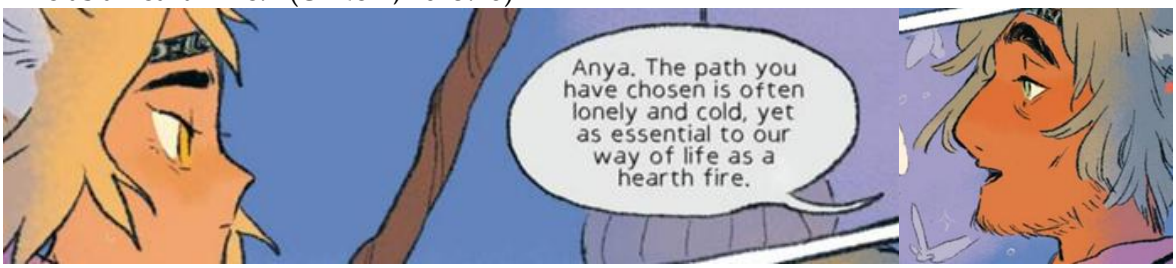
4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Anya's Complex Identity as a Moth Keeper

Kay O'Neill's graphic novel *The Moth Keeper* is a story that depicts Anya's experience of loneliness through her past experiences and her responsibilities as a Moth Keeper. The story presents Anya as a young girl who has experienced separation from her mother since childhood, which becomes one of the experiences that shapes her relationship with loneliness. As she grows older, Anya chooses to become a Moth Keeper, a role that requires her to spend long nights alone outside the village while carrying an important responsibility for her community (O'Neill, 2023). Although she is surrounded by people who care about her, Anya often keeps her feelings and difficulties to herself, making her loneliness more apparent throughout the story. Her experience of separation and her life as a Moth Keeper provide important contexts for understanding the loneliness she experiences. The data related to Anya's experience of existential loneliness are listed below;

Data 1

Yeolen: "Anya. The path you have chosen is often lonely and cold, yet as essential to our way of life as a hearth fire." (O'Neill, 2023:18)



Yeolen, the previous Moth Keeper, reminds Anya that the path she has chosen as a Moth Keeper will be lonely and cold. Anya herself volunteered to become the next Moth Keeper, so she consciously chose this responsibility even though she did fully understand the burden she would have to bear. After learning that the role requires her to spend the quiet and cold nights alone, Anya begins to realize that her choice comes with a great responsibility that is not easy to fulfil.

Data 2

Yeolen: "To be honest, Anya, it's been tough to find someone willing to take on the moth keeper job. I can well understand most folk can't imagine spending so long away from their loved one." (O'Neill, 2023:66)



Yeolen explains to Anya that it has always been difficult to find someone willing to take on the role of Moth Keeper because the responsibility requires a person to spend a long time away from the people they care about. Yeolen also believes that Anya already knew about these consequences from the beginning, yet Anya still offered herself to become a Moth Keeper. From Anya's decision, Yeolen realizes that she does not only understand the difficulties and loneliness she will face, but also sees something meaningful in the role. Yeolen notices that Anya seems to be searching for something that can give her a sense of purpose in her life.

Data 3

Anya: "I supposed I've gotten used to being alone" (O'Neill, 2023:70)



After Yeolen asks Anya why she is willing to offer herself to become a Moth Keeper despite knowing the loneliness she will have to face, Anya explains that she has already used to being alone. Anya's response shows that she has experienced loneliness in her life even before becoming a Moth Keeper. Unlike other people who may find it difficult to spend time away from those they care about, Anya feels that being alone is not something unfamiliar to her.

Data 4

Anya: "We live our lives surrounded by the darkness" (O'Neill, 2023:70)



After explaining how she has become accustomed to loneliness, Anya continues by describing how she sees her world as being surrounded by darkness. She describes the darkness as something that surrounds her everyday life, showing how familiar she is with

living in such an environment. For Anya, the darkness is not something unfamiliar because she has experienced it so often that it has become a familiar part of her life.

Data 5

Anya: "I want to try to be a light for others" (O'Neill, 2023:70)



After explaining that she has become used to loneliness and sees her life as something surrounded by darkness, Anya continues to explain another reason why she still chooses to become a Moth Keeper. Anya says that she wants to try to be "a light for others," showing her desire not to simply accept loneliness as a part of her life, but to become something more meaningful than the loneliness she has experienced. By trying to become a light for others, Anya wants to see herself as something more than her loneliness, which can help her feel better about the loneliness she has experienced.

Data 6

Estel: "But I think Anya put a lot of weight on her own shoulders." (O'Neill, 2023:81)



After meeting Anya, who has just returned from carrying out her duties as a Moth Keeper, Estel notices that something about Anya has changed. Although Anya says that she is fine, Estel cannot ignore the feeling that Anya is hiding something. This change can be seen in Anya's more reserved behavior and her attempts to distance herself from the people around her. Combined with Estel's story about Aimoss, who now seems happier because he can spend more time with Yeolen after Anya has taken over the role of Moth Keeper, this makes Anya even more reluctant to talk about the difficulties she is experiencing. Anya realizes that the path she has chosen as a Moth Keeper has given Aimoss and Yeolen the opportunity to enjoy their time together again, showing that she has succeeded in doing something useful for the people around her, even though it means she must bury her own feelings of loneliness

Data 7

Estel: "I hadn't seen her playing much with the other children, she seemed unusually independent." (O'Neill, 2023:82)



Estel tells the story of how she first met Anya when they were children. She remembers that Anya did not often play with the other children and seemed different from them because she was already unusually independent at that time. Estel noticed that Anya tended to spend less time playing with the other children and appeared to be able to do things on her own. Through this memory, Estel describes how Anya had already shown a tendency to be independent and less involved with other children from a young age.

Data 8

Anya: "If my lantern went out right now… would I even exist anymore?" (O'Neill, 2023:101)



After becoming a Moth Keeper, Anya has spent many long and quiet nights alone while carrying out her responsibilities. As she continues to experience the loneliness of the night, the loneliness that she has kept to herself for a long time begins to return and affects her confidence in herself. She begins to feel the absence of the warmth she has hoped to find through her role as a Moth Keeper and through being useful to the people around her. During one of these nights, Anya looks at her lantern and begins to wonder what would happen if it suddenly went out.

Data 9

Anya: "If you look through the eyes of the stars, I'm really nothing more than a moth

myself" (O'Neill, 2023:102)



After questioning whether she would still exist if her lantern went out, Anya continues to reflect on herself while spending the night alone. As she looks at the stars, she begins to compare herself with the moths that she takes care of as a Moth Keeper. Anya realizes that, like the moths, she is also drawn to light and warmth and continues to search for something that can guide her through the darkness. She then imagines how she would appear when seen from the perspective of the stars and describes herself as nothing more than moth. Through this comparison, Anya places herself in the same position as the moths she usually watches over.

Data 10

Anya: "Why does the darkness scare me if it's all I've ever known?" (O'Neill, 2023:130)



As the night continues, Anya spends more time alone in the darkness while carrying out her responsibilities as a Moth Keeper. Although she has previously said that she has become used to being alone and living in the darkness, she still feels afraid and lonely during the long nights. As the darkness surrounds her, Anya begins to question why she still feels afraid of it when it is something she has experienced for so long.

4.2 Analysis of Anya's Existential Loneliness in The Moth Keeper

In data 1, Anya shows the characteristic of Search for Meaning because she sees the role of Moth Keeper as something meaningful in her life. Although she knows that the path is lonely and cold, she still chooses to take on the responsibility because she feels that the role is essential to the lives of the Nocturnal people and allows her to contribute to her community. Her willingness to accept a difficult and lonely responsibility shows that Anya is trying to find a sense of purpose by becoming someone who is useful and important to others. Therefore, Anya can be categorized as experiencing Search for Meaning because she finds meaning in her existence through fulfilling a role that benefits the people around (Käcko et al., 2024; Noone & Yang, 2022).

In Data 2, Anya shows the characteristic of Search for Meaning through her willingness to choose a path that requires her to be separated from the others. Yeolen's explanation shows that the Moth Keeper role is difficult to accept because it demands a long kackoperiod of separation, yet Anya still offered herself for the role despite knowing this consequence. Her decision suggests that Anya is looking for something that she considers worth pursuing in her life, even when it requires her to give up comfort. This can be categorized as Search for Meaning because Anya is willing to leave the comfort in order to find something that she believes can give her life a sense of purpose and direction (Fang et al., 2024; Garnow et al., 2024; Walsh et al., 2025). Therefore, Anya's willingness to accept separation as part of her chosen path indicates her process of searching for something that can give her life a sense of purpose and meaning.

In Data 3, Anya shows the characteristic of Self-Isolation because she tends to keep her feelings of loneliness to herself and presents being alone as something she has already accepted (Brown et al., 2021; Hadeei, 2024; Vosa, 2024). Her statement, "I've gotten used to being alone," shows how easily she dismisses her own loneliness by treating it as a familiar part of her life rather than expressing or sharing how she feels with others. Because she has become used to being alone, Anya is also able to accept the Moth Keeper role and the solitude that comes with it without considering loneliness as a major obstacle. Thus, Anya's response reflects Self-Isolation through her tendency to deal with her loneliness privately and become accustomed to living apart from others.

In Data 4, Anya shows the characteristic of Self-Isolation through the way she describes darkness or loneliness as something familiar in her life. By stating that they live their lives surrounded by darkness, Anya presents loneliness as a condition that has become a normal part of her experience rather than something she needs to avoid or change. This suggests that Anya has become used to living with loneliness and tends to accept the distance between herself and others (Brown et al., 2021; Garnow et al., 2024; Walsh et al., 2025). Therefore, her response reflects Self-Isolation because Anya has become used to experiencing loneliness and tends to accept it as part of her life rather than expressing her feelings to others.

In Data 5, Anya shows the characteristic of Search for Meaning through her desire to be "a light for others." Since Anya has become used to loneliness, she tries to find something that can make her see herself as more than the loneliness she has experienced (Mann et al., 2022; Mansfield et al., 2021). By trying to be a light for others, Anya wants to see what it feels like to become someone who can bring something positive to other people. This can be categorized as Search for Meaning because Anya is trying to discover something that can give her a different sense of purpose and help her understand herself beyond the loneliness, she has already become familiar with. Therefore, her desire to be a light for others shows her attempt

to find a different meaning in herself beyond the loneliness she has experienced (Mann et al., 2022; Mansfield et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2025).

In Data 6, Anya shows the characteristic of Self-Isolation through her tendency to keep the difficulties she experiences to herself (Brown et al., 2021; Senese et al., 2024; Umberson & Donnelly, 2023). Estel notices that Anya has changed and seems to be carrying a heavy burden, even though Anya says that she is fine and does not talk about what she is experiencing. Anya chooses to hide her loneliness because she realizes that taking the role of Moth Keeper has allowed Aimoss and Yeolen to spend more time together again. This can be categorized as Self-Isolation because Anya distances herself emotionally from the people around her by keeping her struggles and feelings of loneliness to herself instead of sharing them with others (Holt-Lunstad, 2024; Umberson & Donnelly, 2023). Therefore, Anya's behavior shows Self-Isolation through her tendency to carry her emotional burden alone while avoiding expressing her difficulties to the people who care about her.

In Data 7, Anya shows the characteristic of Self-Isolation through her tendency to spend less time interacting with other children. Estel's memory shows that Anya had already been less involved in playing with other children from a young age and appeared to prefer doing things on her own (Brown et al., 2021; Bilal & Helm, 2026). This behavior shows that Anya tended to create distance from others even before she became a Moth Keeper. This can be categorized as Self-Isolation because Anya reduces her involvement with other people and becomes accustomed to being on her own. Therefore, Estel's description shows that Anya's tendency to isolate herself has been part of her behavior since childhood

In Data 8, Anya shows the characteristic of Existential Uncertainty through her question about whether she would still exist if her lantern went out. The lantern can be seen as a representation of the hope Anya has in becoming "a light for others" and finding warmth by being useful to the people around her. However, after spending many nights alone, Anya begins to question what would happen if that hope and feeling of purpose were to disappear. This can be categorized as Existential Uncertainty because Anya becomes uncertain about herself and her existence when she can no longer be certain that the hope and warmth she has associated with her role as a Moth Keeper will remain (Binder, 2024; Long et al., 2022; Pinel et al., 2022). Therefore, her question about the lantern shows her uncertainty about what will remain of herself if the hope that has guided her begins to fade.

In Data 9, Anya shows the characteristic of Existential Uncertainty through the way she sees herself as a moth that depends on light. The light can be seen as a representation of the hope Anya has in becoming "a light for others" and finding warmth by being useful to the people around her. However, Anya begins to realize that, like a moth that follows a light without knowing how long it will remain, she also cannot know how long her passion for being the light for the others will continue. This can be categorized as Existential Uncertainty because Anya becomes uncertain about the future of the passion and sense of purpose that she has placed in her role as a Moth Keeper (Binder, 2024; Garnow et al., 2024; Pinel et al., 2022).

In Data 10, Anya shows the characteristic of Existential Uncertainty through the way she sees darkness as something that still frightens her despite being familiar with it (Binder, 2024; Käcko et al., 2024; Pinel et al., 2022). The darkness can be seen as a representation of the loneliness Anya experiences while spending long nights alone as a Moth Keeper. However, Anya begins to realize that becoming accustomed to living in darkness does not mean that she will always feel comfortable or safe in it, as she still experiences fear and loneliness. This

can be categorized as Existential Uncertainty because Anya becomes uncertain about her own feelings toward the loneliness and darkness that have become a familiar part of her life.

Theoretically, this study contributes to literary discussions of existential loneliness by examining how the experience is represented through a character's relationship with communal responsibility. Anya's loneliness is not presented only as physical separation; it is also connected to the concealment of emotional difficulties, uncertainty about identity, and the effort to find meaning through service to others. The analysis also demonstrates the value of examining dialogue, internal reflection, panel composition, and visual symbolism together when studying existential experience in a graphic novel. The three analytical dimensions used in this article provide an interpretive framework for this text and should not be treated as a universal measurement model.

Practically, the narrative invites readers to consider how personal responsibility can affect relationships and individual well-being. Anya's commitment to the village illustrates the value of contributing to a community, while her experience also shows the importance of recognizing personal limits and communicating emotional difficulties. The novel encourages reflection on mutual support, the distribution of responsibility, and the need to maintain relationships while fulfilling obligations. Readers may also consider how communities can recognize people who appear independent but may be carrying burdens without adequate support.

5. Conclusion

The analysis shows that *The Moth Keeper* represents existential loneliness through Anya's limited social participation, her tendency to keep emotional difficulties private, and her doubts about her identity beyond the Moth Keeper role. Her decision to protect the lunar moths gives her a sense of direction and allows her to contribute to the village, while the solitude required by the position places pressure on her relationships and personal well-being. The narrative does not present responsibility as inherently harmful; it depicts the tension that emerges when communal duty becomes difficult to balance with emotional needs and social connection. Through dialogue, internal reflection, and visual contrasts between darkness and lantern light, the graphic novel connects the search for meaning with questions of selfhood, belonging, and responsibility.

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Conflict of Interest
The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest of any kind or from any party in relation to the selection of the research project, research design, data collection, analysis or interpretation of the data, preparation of the manuscript, or the decision to publish these findings.

Authors' Contribution
Anggraeni Ramadhani: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.
Anindya Thalita Salsabila: Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.
Wijaya, Kusuma: Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.
Rommel Utungga Pasopati: Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Cahyaningsih Pujimahanani: Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Statement of the Use of AI

The authors declare that generative AI tools were used to assist in refining grammar, readability, and language during the preparation of this article. However, all research findings, analyses, and content were reviewed and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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