

DR. AMIT SHANKAR SAHA**Existential Alienation and the Indian Diaspora:
An Approach to the Writings of Anita Desai,
Bharati Mukherjee, Sunetra Gupta, and
Jhumpa Lahiri****Abstract**

This paper explores the points of convergence between existential alienation and diasporic alienation through the fictional works of Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Sunetra Gupta, and Jhumpa Lahiri. It shows that the creation of identity and self-fashioning by the Indian diaspora are processes akin to the creation of essences by human beings for their existence. It investigates Sartre's being-in-itself, being-for-itself, and being-in-the-world from the diasporic perspective to show that the enormous freedom invested on human beings is crucial in making choices of multiple identities in diasporic life. The essay further goes on to Camus's concept of absurdism to explain the need for creating values and meaning in an indifferent postmodern world to survive the predicament caused by displacement. It brings out the existential nature of the paradoxes inherent in diasporic life. This marriage of a currently out-of-favour philosophy known for its universality with a relatively in-favour theory known for its

specificity is done so as to acknowledge an alternative perspective. Thereby it also broadens the critical space for examining the literary representation of the Indian diaspora.

Keywords: Diaspora, existentialism, alienation, Jhumpa Lahiri, Sunetra Gupta, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai.

Existential Alienation and the Indian Diaspora: An Approach to the Writings of Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Sunetra Gupta, and Jhumpa Lahiri by Dr. Amit Shankar Saha

The Indian diaspora is not different from other displaced populations in the context of bearing the senses of alienation, rootlessness, non-belonging, and loneliness. The differences between two dislocated peoples can be in their degree of acceptance by the host society and their own self-fashioning. A study of the selected works of Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Sunetra Gupta, and Jhumpa Lahiri shows not only how the migrant Indians are increasingly being accepted by the West but also how these diasporic Indians cope with such a shifting plane of acceptance through the perpetual process of creation of identities. The spectrum of the works of these writers address all three meanings of diaspora “as social form”, “as type of consciousness”, and “as mode of cultural production” (Vertovec 142). Anita Desai’s *Bye-Bye Blackbird* and *Fasting, Feasting*, Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*, Sunetra Gupta’s *Memories of Rain* and *A Sin of Colour*, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* and

Interpreter of Maladies have been crucial in creating a critical space for Indian diasporic writing in the canon of diaspora study. The theme of alienation that encompasses all such study has been dealt with in its various aspects—social, psychological, cultural, political, philosophical, and so on—by both Western and Indian writers. And it is often found that the existential aspect of alienation is the most potent area of engagement for diaspora study. Otto Bohlmann's *Conrad's Existentialism* is a case in point. But Indian diasporic writing has been quite neglected from the probe of existential philosophy. This paper, in view of the above fact, aims to produce the said confluence as an alternative vision for the study of the Indian diaspora and its literature.

It was the likes of so-called existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre, Franz Kafka, and Albert Camus who worked with the fictional form to express their thoughts and show the indifference of the world with regard to human beings. What these writers have done is to bring out through their protagonists, be it Sartre's Roquentin (*Nausea*) or Kafka's Joseph K (*The Trial*) or Camus's Meursault (*The Outsider*), the universal nature of human alienation. Sartre in his book *Being and Nothingness* writes that the world in itself has no intention, either malign or benign; it is totally indifferent and one feels abandoned in this midst of indifference. The indifferent circumambient world gives rise to a sense of isolation in the being especially because of the fact that this is the general condition of human life.

Stuart Hall in his introduction to the book *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Sage, London 1996) writes that identification is a process involving certain conditions of existence. But as the natural world yields increasingly to human comprehension it appears more as a construct in abstraction; and existence, as emphasized by Camus, becomes devoid of any absolute meaning. To exist, in a Sartrean sense, is just to be there—a nominal notion without any functional significance. For Sartre, being has two forms: being-in-itself and being-for-itself.

Beings-in-themselves are non-conscious things, which can be said to have essences, which exist independently of any observer and which constitute all the *things* in the world. Beings-for-themselves are conscious beings whose consciousness renders them entirely different from other things, in their relation both to themselves and to one another, and those other things. (Warnock, *Introduction* xii)

Basically, being-in-itself is the initial material object whereas being-for-itself is that original raw body now defined and fashioned thereby giving an identity to a self-contained entity. Just as being-in-itself self-fashions to become being-for-itself, the dislocated individual needs self-fashioning to become a member of the host society. The alien into the native is a process analogous to the creation of identity for existence. Thus, self-fashioning is necessary for all migrants, expatriates, refugees, and exiles. Frantz Fanon's famous dictum—"In this world

through which I travel I am endlessly creating myself”—makes clear the intricate link between displacement (“travel”) and self-fashioning (“creating myself”). It is also evident from the above discussion the parallelism between existential thinking and the context of displacement. No doubt, Camus’s and Kafka’s protagonists are always in movement—questing or fleeing.

The foundation of existentialism is the idea that existence is prior to essence for human beings. According to Stephen Priest, “Sartre divides the things that exists into three kinds: human beings, artefacts, and naturally occurring objects” (Priest 24). In the case of an artefact, essence precedes existence because the conception of the artefact was first in the mind of its maker before its existence. In the case of a naturally occurring object, like a stone, existence and essence coincide. Even animals can be included in this group because animals lack self-consciousness like humans. But in the case of human beings existence precedes essence because being-in-itself predates and is prerequisite for being-for-itself. “When we are born we have no essence as human beings. Only the totality of choices we make in life makes us the people who we are” (Priest 25). The pitfall in this argument is the theological consideration that the conception of human beings is first in the mind of God. But Sartre’s existentialism is atheistic and hence he declares in *Existentialism and Humanism*:

If God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man [. . .] Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards [. . .] there is no human nature, [. . .] Man simply is. (Priest 28).

Here comes the concept of being-in-the-world because every human being “encounters himself” in the world. But this world is not an object of knowledge or perception but rather a composition of animate and inanimate obstacles for human beings to overcome.

The world of the late 1960s UK that Adit and Dev encounter in Anita Desai’s novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* has racism and discrimination. They are not totally “othered” but their partial acceptance is as farcical as that of the land surveyor who is given the job of a janitor of a school in Kafka’s *The Castle*. Adit is doing a somewhat glass-ceilinged job that he has not exactly desired; Dev is offered jobs quite demeaning to him. The migrants’ world is not exactly the El Dorado of their dreams. In their path of integration into the host society, the obstacles are neither any malevolent individual nor any inanimate barrier: it is rather the very nature of a changing world, as realized by Dev in the English countryside on seeing the cows eyeing him with curiosity.

One of them looked up, noticed him and ambled up to the river’s edge to stare across it at him. He sat still, scarcely breathing. The other cows noticed too and followed, and soon the entire herd was lined up along the bank, gazing

at him with huge, wondering eyes, as children at a zoo will stare at a chimpanzee. [. . .] But no, they looked away at last, and fell to grazing again. He breathed more easily and wondered if they would have treated every intruder to this deep scrutiny, or did they see in him, his dark skin and black eyes, something alien and exotic? For the first time in England, a thought of this order did not upset him as unjust or foolish – he saw it as fitting into the pattern of nature. (Desai, *Blackbird* 169)

This experience lets Dev understand that the world, particularly in his diasporic situation, is just conditioned to be indifferent. Earlier while venturing into the city “the menacing slither of escalators strikes panic into a speechless Dev” (Desai, *Blackbird* 57) and hence his discovery of London is more in amazement than in understanding. On the escalator “he is swept down with an awful sensation of being taken where he does not want to go. Down, down and further down – like Alice falling, falling down the rabbit hole, like a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a prison” (Desai, *Blackbird* 57). After his encounter with the cows in the countryside Dev finds a continuum between human and animal behaviour and no longer feels like a stranger.

Racism and discrimination are mere manifestations of an inhibitory world and even if they are removed the world does not become lucid. Moni, from Sunetra Gupta’s novel *Memories of Rain*, does not encounter any tangible obstacle in accommodating herself in the West. Her

alienation comes in the form of personal betrayal by her husband, Anthony. Still, the betrayal would have given meaning to her existence through her struggle against it, even if in a losing cause, but for Anthony's indifference towards her feelings. Anthony's attitude towards her denies her of any self-respect and she feels quarantined in an indifferent world just like the residents of Oran in Camus's *The Plague* and, like them, there arises in her an intense longing for absent loved ones. She makes her secret escape with their child, incidentally on the day of the child's birthday, and comes back to India. But Moni still fears what if Anthony "chooses simply to forget her, if the loss of the child shakes him only like an intermittent fever" (Gupta, *Memories* 114) and he has no suffering. Moni wants to bring meaning into a nonchalant world even in the form of suffering. At the airport, Moni imagines that Anthony "is staring, in cold, mad anger into the crumpled ruins of the birthday party, the last child leaves, unaware of the existential satire they have unwittingly become part of, a birthday party without the birthday girl" (Gupta, *Memories* 188). Moni creates emotion and feelings for hers is a life of sensations. An indifferent world is in itself an impediment to existence and if one wants to live in such a world one needs to create meaning constantly.

The globalized world is ever so accommodating but it does not lose its inherent characteristic of being indifferent. The situation in which Tara, from Bharati Mukherjee's novel

Desirable Daughters, finds herself when her house is bombed is not of her own making even though it is linked with her shuffling of identities. It seems as if the terrorist Abbas Sattar Hai has been planted by the very nature of things, in total disregard of her existence, to destroy not only her physical self, the “being-in-itself”, but also her identity, the “being-for-itself.” The world appears to be constantly construing to deny human existence. Similarly, when Mrs. Sen, of Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story “Mrs. Sen’s”, tries to balance her dual identities, she finds herself hindered by little things that assume importance in the context of displacement. Mrs. Sen’s desire to cook a whole fish is hampered by her inability to drive a car and go to the market to buy it. Her attempt to bring the twain to meet ends in a near fatal accident.

Death is inevitable for all beings and often it is death itself or near-death experiences that bring a semblance of meaning in a world of indifference. Jasmine Vijn, from Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine*, has a vision after her husband, Prakash, dies:

Think Vijn & Wife! Prakash exhorted me from every corner of our grief-darkened room. There is no dying, there is only an ascending or a descending, a moving on to other planes. Don’t crawl back to Hasnapur and feudalism. That Jyoti is dead. (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 96)

She decides to go to America alone and realize her husband’s dream; then burn his suit and destroy herself in that fire. Her suicidal mission eggs her on but after

landing in America as an illegal immigrant, she is raped and in return she murders her rapist. The mayhem denies her death for she realizes that her body is merely a shell – a “being-in-itself” – and what the vision entailed was the death of an identity, leaving scope to be reborn with a new identity – a “being-for-itself”. The inevitability of death questions the purpose of living and it is this inevitability itself that invests all human existence with the universality of a condition. Like Camus’s Meursault when facing his own execution in *The Outsider*, Jasmine realizes her own worth at the moment of self-destruction. The realization is necessary but not sufficient to prevent one from pining away as is characterized by K, the central character of Kafka’s *The Trial*, who exhausts himself in defensive probes against an unspecified accusation. In the face of such utter meaninglessness of life the logical question that arises is – Why live at all and not kill oneself?

The idea of human existence even after death is absurd, as Lucretius and Hume have argued variously. According to Hume, “there is no more difficulty in conceiving my non-existence after death, than in conceiving my non-existence before birth” (Scruton 311) and according to Lucretius, the “fear of not existing in the future is no more rational than fear of not having existed in the past” (Scruton 566). Yet, there is a persistence of feeling that one’s death is not one’s end. This is so because:

“I” can be projected beyond death. I can wonder what I should think or feel, in the circumstances where my body

lies inert and lifeless. There is nothing incoherent in this thought. [. . .] I simply cannot think of a world without thinking also of my perspective upon it. And that means thinking of my own existence. (Scruton 311)

In such a circumstance when one contemplates suicide it becomes difficult to understand exactly what one wants to end – existence, essence, identity, or merely the body. In fact it is beyond understanding because even though death is an absolute certainty one can have no experience of death. This, though, does not answer the question as to why one should go on living. In fact Moni, before deciding to escape to India, had first contemplated death for herself and her child as an “ultimate resolution” (Gupta, *Memories* 60) to deliver from “the torment of life, the torture of desire, the pain of its fulfillment, the shards of its memory” (Gupta, *Memories* 61). But Moni does not choose death because it is a succumbing and she decides to rather revolt.

Albert Camus answer to the question on why one must go on living in a meaningless world is based on the concept of absurdism – that one must rebel against the meaninglessness of life. The less meaning life has the more it is worth living because of the greater need of rebellion. In *The Plague*, the gist of the conversation between Dr. Rieux and Tarrou is that even in the face of death human beings should experience the present moment to the fullest and so also the succession of

present moments, for this is the revolt against the absurd. Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* ends with the words:

La l tfe elle-mem e vers let sommets suffit a  remplir un cover d'homme. Il faux imaginer Sisyphes heur eux . . .

[The struggle itself towards the summits is sufficient to fill the heart of man with joy. One must imagine Sisyphus happy]

According to Camus, "in the strict sense of the word, the absurd is neither the world nor myself, but the *link* between the world and myself" [. . .] absurd is the confrontation of consciousness" (de Luppe 6). The confrontation is the rebellion and existential logic demands the continuance of consciousness because the existence of the consciousness implies the existence of the world. According to Sartre, "it is [. . .] our ability to negate propositions, to deny the truth, and to describe things not only truly but also falsely, which makes us conscious of ourselves as different and distinguishable from the world which surrounds us. In being thus conscious of ourselves we are thereby rendered conscious of the world" (Warnock, *Introduction* xiii).

It is the idea of denial and falsity in relation to the consciousness that impels Debendranath in Sunetra Gupta's novel *A Sin of Colour* to escape, not like Moni into any previous identity, but into anonymity. Debendranath fakes death by disappearing, and when he is presumed to be drowned, he feels exonerated from the guilt of having

amorous feelings for his elder brother's wife. It is no doubt an escape from a world of restrictions but equally his escape into anonymity is a step further in his displacement from India to England, as if the world has become too small for physical displacement to symbolize distancing and estrangement. Twenty years later when Debendranath's niece Niharika makes her disappearing act she does so along with her lover, the married Englishman Daniel Faraday. Debendranath and Niharika escape from the claustrophobic sensation of today's world, filled with anxiety, bewilderment, guilt, and a gamut of identities gained through names, citizenships, relationships, and so on. The world is beset with meaningless restrictions that thwart human existence and often the most satisfactory form of living and creating meaning for life is in the apparently paradoxical notion of escaping into anonymity. Debendranath and Niharika choose to create new selves by destroying old ones. They were free to make those choices because human beings are what they choose to be.

Freedom is a weapon to rebel against the ridiculousness of the world. Existentialist thought entails that human beings are essentially "free to choose their mortality, their attitudes towards God and the world, their approach to death and love" (Warnock, *Introduction* xvi). For Camus, freedom allows a multitude of possibilities and human beings need to realize those possibilities: "so many moments are allowed me until the moment in which I die.

I must not lose a single one of them! I must extend the range of my experience as widely as possible” (de Luppe 10). The options of life partners that Niharika faces are the bachelor doctor in India, Rahul Mitra, or the married man in England, Daniel Faraday. She chooses Daniel and without any question of morality or ethics because she creates her own values. Sartre’s area of human freedom “includes freedom to choose what to do, in the sense of freedom to choose what is *right* to do” (Warnock, *Introduction* xvi). Sartre analyses in *Existentialism and Humanism* this aspect of freedom exemplarily in the case of Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*.

We find here a certain young woman, Maggie Tulliver, who is an incarnation of the value of passion and is aware of it. She is in love with a young man, Stephen, who is engaged to another, an insignificant young woman. This Maggie Tulliver, instead of heedlessly seeking her own happiness, chooses in the name of human solidarity to sacrifice herself and to give up the man she loves. (Priest 44)

But Sartre stresses that had Maggie justified her grand passion and “preferred, in fulfillment of sexual desire, to ignore the prior engagement of the man she loved” (Priest 44) there would not be any opposition of moralities because the overruling aim is freedom. Maggie in a boat, on the Floss, with Stephen Guest is comparable to Niharika in the punt, on the Cherwell, with Daniel Faraday. Maggie decides to come back whereas Niharika decides to elope but the two cases are equivalent because in both of

them the choices are made on the plane of free commitment.

This naturally raises the questions of morality, ethics, and values. But since the existence of human beings on the earth is merely an accident all values are human-made and everyone is free to create one's own values. The guiding principle to creating values is in the statement – "In fashioning myself I fashion man" (Priest 30). Human beings can justify their actions only if they can justify similar actions by one and all of their species. It is a matter of responsibility, for it a commitment on behalf of all humankind and nothing can be better for one unless it is better for all. Human being has "the responsibility to make sure that his freedom does not impinge upon the meaningful freedom of others" (Gindin 233). Bohlmann writes: "Sartre argues that in creating values through our choices we do not choose a pre-existing good but render something good when we choose it in good faith [. . .] apparently, man's sense of responsibility – allied to his conscience – should provide sufficient guidance" (Bohlmann 107). Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine faces the dilemma of choosing between Bud Ripplemeyer and Taylor Hayes. If she chooses Bud then she has made Taylor as a means to attain her end Bud; and if her choice is Taylor then Bud is the means to attain the end Taylor. The Kantian ethic of treating man only as an end and never as a means is in jeopardy here. In such a situation Jasmine cannot bank on any pre-conceived value and has

to use her instincts to create her own values. Her choice of Taylor is her choice of freedom because she is free to make any choice she wishes. This act determines her self-fashioning because beings are the choices they make.

Human beings are the sum of their commitments and actions. The indifferent world denies action and self-definition implies action – action of making a choice, as in the diasporic situation, between one’s ethnic identity and one’s adopted identity. No doubt, the choice is a dilemma, but even wavering will do for existence, as is the case with Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake*. Ashima can never conclusively make the choice between her relatives in India and her American-born son and daughter in the US. She starts living simultaneously in the two worlds, harbouring multiple identities and ferrying between two continents constantly. When two identities are joined by a hyphen it makes hybrid identity. Padma, from Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Desirable Daughters*, lives such a hybrid life. She is both an American and an Indian and she has self-fashioned her life as, in Sartre’s terms, a project of self towards its possibilities. Her project of selfhood as a TV presenter of the programme “Namaskar, Probasi” is doubly rewarding – catering to her ethnic calling as well as getting recognition in a multi-cultural host society. Unlike Ashima, Padma does not physically travel between two worlds but she does so mentally while executing her project. Padma’s sister Tara too starts to lead her life as a project after the bombing incident by the

terrorist Abbas Sattar Hai. She initiates a quest for her own identity – a kind of struggle to know the very reason of things and satiate herself not only socially and culturally but also metaphysically. She discovers possibilities and finds herself profoundly free to explore them. The project is not exactly the purpose of life but essential to create some meaning out of life. The said purpose may be quite incomprehensible in itself or utterly elusive unless life is fully lived. As Jasmine tells Taylor about her belief that “a whole life’s mission might be to move a flowerpot from one table to another; all the years of education and suffering and laughter, marriage, parenthood, education, serving merely to put a particular person in a particular room with a certain flower” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 60-61). Such a purpose of life cannot be comprehended but one has to have some meaning in living. Living life as projects through exercising one’s freedom provides this meaning.

In Desai’s novel *Fasting, Feasting*, Arun as a student in Massachusetts, USA, feels in his displaced condition that “he had at last experienced the total freedom of anonymity, the total absence of relations, of demands, needs, ties, responsibilities, commitments. He was Arun. He had no past, no family and no country” (Desai, *Fasting* 172). Such feelings alienate him physically from the world but it does not cause pain for he experiences the bonding of a general human condition. An indifferent world filled with overbearing individuals apparently leaves little scope to search for possibilities. It is not surprising then that

when he goes to swim in a pond “it is due to the water, an element that removes him from his normal self, and opens out another world of possibilities” (Desai, *Fasting* 222). Mary Warnock in her introduction to Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* writes, referring to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s works, about the physical properties of the world as the potential source of revelation of the nature of existence thus:

Coleridge perhaps more than any other writer in English demonstrated in his detailed description of, for example, the movements of water, the same belief that from the sensible properties of things one could deduce not only *their* true nature, but the true nature of the universe at large. (Warnock, *Introduction* xvi)

Like the Ancient Mariner who gains an understanding of his existence while in the ocean, Arun discovers “another world of possibilities” while in the pond. Perhaps it is the contingency in the world – of where possibilities may lie – that accounts for its fundamental absurdity.

In fact the contingency of existence is the basic premise for existential thought. If human essence precedes human existence then human existence becomes necessary contradicting the observable facts of contingency.

In philosophy contingency is contrasted with necessity. If something exists contingently then it exists but it is possible that it should not have existed: It is but it might not have been. If something exists necessarily then it

exists and it is not possible that it should not have existed: It is and it could not fail to be. (Priest 22)

Contingency is inherent in the world because existence demands creation of selves and what can be created is always liable to be destroyed. The sustenance of an identity by the perpetual process of self-definition becomes dependent on chance. One can lose one's identity in a moment just like the overcoat of Akaky Akakiyevich in Nikolai Gogol's short story "The Overcoat". Gogol of Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* goes through the crisis of identity due to the contingent nature of everything that surrounds him. Gogol creates his alter ego Nikhil and the conflict between these two selves is because each one tries to free itself from the other – an impossibility since both are the manifestations of a single consciousness. Only when Gogol reconciles with this truth, he is able to relax and by the end of the novel is able to realize the fundamental condition of his existence.

For Sartre the "other" is indispensable to one's existence. Sartre says in *Existentialism and Humanism* that:

Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, contrary to that of Kant, when we say "I think" we are attaining to ourselves in the presence of the other, and we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves. [. . .] I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever of myself, except through the mediation of another. (Priest 39)

Sartre explains this in *Being and Nothingness* by introducing the idea of being-for-others. He takes the example of someone who is eavesdropping and is totally absorbed in the task oblivious of the surrounding. But as soon as the person becomes aware of some other person's presence there he/she simultaneously becomes aware of his/her identity as an eavesdropper. The presence of the other is instrumental in recognizing oneself as a being-in-the-world. James Gindin explains this about Camus's heroes:

We have a difficult time in defining ourselves within a vacuum, and sometimes can only define ourselves in opposition to others [. . .] Camus's heroes also have a great deal of difficulty discovering who they are, as Meursault, the hero of *The Stranger* [*The Outsider*], can only begin to understand himself in objection to society's impingements upon him. (Gindin 230)

Human beings' limitations due to impingements can vary due to historical situations: "man may be born a slave in a pagan society, or may be a feudal baron, or a proletarian" (Priest 39). But there is also a human universality of condition: the necessities of having to work for a living, of encountering a world already inhabited by others, of the certainty of death, and so on. It is this that makes the likes of Dev, Gogol, Jasmine, and Niharika one with all humanity.

The constantly changing postmodern world and the accordingly self-fashioning individuals create minimal

friction with each other and often leads to an uncanny feeling, as explained by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, of the world getting modified at the whim of the changes of one's consciousness. It is such a feeling that replaces social alienation with cosmic alienation, making the Indian diaspora a victim of the universal condition of existence. It is interesting to notice that the points of convergence between diaspora study and existential philosophy show the seamlessness of the process of transformation of the alien into the native. And despite the postmodernist consideration that self-fashioning is an artificial phenomenon, the fashioning of the self is part of the continuing process of creating essences. The diasporic situation heightens the urgency and thereby brings the issue of identity into active reckoning. In the diaspora the migrants see themselves as the "others" in society even when they are not made aware of it explicitly through discriminatory attitudes. They find themselves as Sartrean "eavesdropper." When Moushumi reveals to her friends that her husband Nikhil's original name is Gogol, Gogol sees himself as the eavesdropper. When Moni translates a Bengali song for Anthony in a cottage at the Cornish coast and finds him not listening to her, she sees herself as the eavesdropper. When Sarah reprimands Adit for being sentimental on discovering Sarah's childhood toys at his in-laws' place, Adit sees himself as the eavesdropper. Gogol, Moni, Adit all trespass into some territory that alters the perception of their own identities.

This conjuring of the “other” that alters identity is an inescapable phenomenon because as Said says in his essay “Identity, Authority, and Freedom: The Potentate and the Traveler”:

Historically, every society has its Other: the Greeks had the barbarians, the Arabs the Persians, the Hindus the Muslims, and on and on. But since the nineteenth century consolidated the world systems, all cultures and societies today are intermixed. No country on earth is made up of homogenous natives; each has its immigrants, its internal “Others”, and each society, very much like the world we live in, is a hybrid. (Said, *Reflections* 396)

The “other” is not rigid but yields fluidly to numerous manifestations – the historical other, the post-colonial other, the diasporic other, the ethnic other, the cultural other, the religious other, the racial other, the subaltern other, the primitive other, the existential other, and so on. But as is the case with Tara, when she comes out of a bookstore into the crowd of Haight Street in San Francisco, California, and finds her kinship with the world lost because nobody pays attention to her, she still sees herself as the “other” – “I stand out” (Mukherjee, *Daughters* 79). This is because the “other” is not external to her self. Here it becomes a manifestation of the self – “a psychic image” as Homi K. Bhabha explains in his essay “Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the postcolonial prerogative”:

“For the image – as point of identification – marks the site of an ambivalence. Its representation is always spatially split – it makes *present* something that is *absent* – and temporally deferred: it is the representation of a time that is always elsewhere, a repetition.” (Bhabha, 51).

The existence of one’s duality makes present what is absent – it makes real what is virtual. It is the “binary, two-part identities [that] function in a kind of narcissistic reflection of the One in the Other” (Bhabha 51). Gogol / Nick or Jasmine / Jane are such reflections of each other simultaneously – both can be identified as object as well as image at the same time. They grow out of each other.

As a principle of identification, the Other bestows a degree of objectivity, but its representation – be it the social process of the law or the psychic process of the Oedipus – is always ambivalent, disclosing a lack. For instance, the common, conversational distinction between the letter and spirit of the Law displays the otherness of Law itself; the ambiguous grey area between Justice and judicial procedure is, quite literally, a conflict of judgement. (Bhabha 52)

Just as the spirit of Law displays the inscribed Law’s otherness, self-fashioning itself, and quite paradoxically since self-fashioning is often a reaction to the “other”, displays the diasporic individual’s otherness. The otherness is between the formerly fashioned self and the subsequently fashioned self. Identity is always in a limbo between two successive selves – lacking conclusiveness.

As long as the individual sees the gamut of identities (social, political, personal, and so on) externally there is a crisis of identity due to confusion of plentitude. But once the condition is internalized, the whole edifice of tangible identities collapses and one has to rely exclusively on one's self for creation of identity. According to James Gindin: "The collapse of public labels, public ties that would help the individual define himself, leads to man's necessary reliance on himself as the only means available" (Gindin 230). Under this consideration there comes a point in time when Gogol finds himself alone upstairs while Ashima and Sonia prepare for a party downstairs. Jasmine finds herself alone when Du has left and Bud is not yet home. Debendranath finds himself alone when he disappears leaving behind Jennifer in Oxford and Reba in Calcutta. Arun finds himself alone when he cannot look at Mrs. Patton sunbathing and is asked to go away by a sick and vomiting Melanie. It is then that the characters in their solitude confront their selves.

It is a moment of epiphany because, even though one's whole life cannot be taken as a frame of reference since a part is still left to be lived, some sense can be made by comprehending the "time-slice" or "person-stage" taken from the span of life. Sartre says, "Life is nothing until it is lived; it is yours to make sense of, and the value of it is nothing else but the sense that you choose" (Priest 44). Stephen Priest writes in reference to Sartre that when one sees a "whole" object one does not see the "whole of" the

object at once for many parts remain out of the line of vision (Priest 90). But this does not hinder in comprehending the whole object. It is in fact a platitude of epistemology. John Foster in discussing the nature of φ -terminal perception writes: “the perceiving of one physical item is perceptually mediated by the perceiving of another” (Foster 6). Further, “the perceptual contact with the things in the physical world becomes direct at the point where there is no further perceptual mediation within the physical domain” (Foster 6) and this is the point of φ -terminality. This point is basically the “time-slice” of the portion of the item under observation. Sartre’s idea of time-slice can be got from his views on music: “at any one time (‘actually’), one is hearing only part of the performance although, in another sense, one is thereby hearing all of it” (Priest 290). In a similar sense when one confronts a self-fashioning diasporic individual, one cannot see the multiplicity of identities at once, but this does not hinder the comprehension of the wholeness of all identities in a single self. This is also applicable when the confrontation is with one’s own self and hence the epiphany. It is to be noted that this creation of identities / essences adheres to the idea of nominalism because the combination of identities / essences of each individual is unique as it is a matter of the individual’s choice and each individual has enormous freedom to choose. Thus having identities / essences contingent, individuals are seen as particulars. Sartre’s Roquentin has the same realization in *Nausea*:

Once essence is seen as illusion Roquentin realizes that only particular things exist, in all their uniqueness and individuality. In other words, Roquentin suddenly sees the world as if *conceptualism* or *nominalism* were true. Conceptualism and nominalism are both solutions to the problem of universals which is that of stating what generality consists in, or what it is for there to be types or sorts of things. (Priest 23)

And since postmodernism is nothing but nominalism (having existed contemporarily with Plato and gone by the name of “sophists”) in a new garb, there is nothing incongruous in the characteristics exhibited by the postmodernist world of diasporas. Each diasporic individual is characterized to be unique and this is a common condition.

Roquentin’s existential pondering causes him mental anguish that has its physical manifestation in his nausea. It is so because of the inter-relatedness of the mind and the body. Moreover, as D. H. Lawrence once said, the body is more exacting than the mind and nothing can make bitter into sweet. It is the demand of the body that is often sufficed when deciding on topics like what one eats or what one wears or what lifestyle one leads. As Martin Seymour-Smith remarks in his perceptive introduction to the Penguin edition of Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, that the tragedy of being human is contrary to the teachings of most religions, for selfhood to be dependent not merely on mind but on body as well. When Arun phones Mrs.

Patton and she welcomes him to spend the summer with her family, stressing on the fact that her children are about his age, Arun needs “to quell his nausea” (Desai, *Fasting* 175) at the very idea. Again, when Mr. Patton brings “steak, hamburger, ribs and chops [. . .] to broil and grill, fry and roast” (Desai, *Fasting* 185) at the patio, Arun cannot have that food because his body will possibly revolt against it as he is a vegetarian. Increasingly psychological and the physical are intermixed. Jasmine feels like the recipient of an organ transplant on getting a fake visa for America. Ashima feels that being a foreigner is like a lifelong pregnancy. In fact the very modes of displacement by air or sea are accompanied by physiological symptoms of jetlag and seasickness respectively. In addition to these ailments, there is the inherent sickness for home. Aritha van Herk describes homesickness as an illness that “goes far beyond a vague feeling of nostalgia” (van Herk 217). The nausea of the existential is very much present in the malaise of the diaspora even when the migrants do not ponder, like Roquentin, on their situation.

There is sickness due to movement and disorientation due to the knowledge of prior displacement. The initial reaction of the migrants is to hide or negate or overcome this condition. Perhaps taken unconsciously, this is precisely the first step in self-fashioning. Quite unawares, diasporic individuals start to comprehend and acknowledge the apparent paradoxes of migrant existence. The mechanical and the automatic aspects of

life fuel the absurd. Adit is awed at seeing the Battersea power station in London and compares it to a massive vault / temple for “sacrificial fires” (Desai, *Blackbird* 54), thereby intermixing archaic imagery with a modern invention. Jasmine, in America, on first seeing a revolving door wonders “how could something be always open and at the same time always closed” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 133); on first seeing an escalator wonders “how could something be always moving and always still” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 133) thus raising deep philosophical problems related to “paradox”. (Compare T. S. Eliot’s “still point of the turning world” in “Burnt Norton”, II, from *Four Quartets* where Eliot establishes time as a state of permanent change and contrasts it with the still point – the paradox of the center of the wheel). The latter generations of migrants grown up to see the absurd as the matter of fact of life. For Rabi, there is no rhetoric of contradiction when he calls from Australia, where he is with his father, to his mother in the US to tell her that “we’ll be back sometime before we leave” (Mukherjee, *Daughters* 256). Gogol, who has traveled between India and the US a number of times since his childhood, has grown used to seeing the airport as the place of both arrival and departure. Above all, the second-generation migrants often see themselves both as natives and aliens under specific circumstances and sometimes in simultaneous exclusivity within a multicultural society.

These apparently contradictory positions do cause a feeling of uneasiness in diasporic life. But there is apparently no cure for the predicament and the condition has to be endured through self-fashioning, with the aim being to attain a hybrid state of assimilation within the host society. It is interesting to note that the points of convergence between Indian diaspora study and existential philosophy show the seamlessness of this process of self-fashioning. The marriage of a currently out-of-favour philosophy known for its universality with a relatively in-favour theory known for its specificity is done so as to acknowledge an alternative perspective. The commonness between existential alienation and diasporic alienation brings about a rather meaningful approach to the critical study of Indian diasporic writing. Thereby it also broadens the critical space for examining the literary representation of the Indian diaspora.

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