



Becoming Authentic: A Sartrean Reading of Anjum Hasan's *The Cosmopolitans*

Hanna Binoy¹, Dr. Narinder K. Sharma²

¹Research Scholar, Central University of Punjab, Punjab, India

²Assistant Professor of English, Central University of Punjab, India

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Abstract— This paper critically examines Anjum Hasan's novel *The Cosmopolitans* (2015), employing the philosophical lens of Sartre's existentialism to explore how Qayenaat, the protagonist, navigates the existential themes of bad faith, alienation, being-for-others, and the pursuit of authenticity. Her fluctuating relationships, avoidance of societal roles, failed artistic ambitions, and eventual withdrawal into a fabricated identity are analysed as modes of existential evasion. Drawing on some of Sartre's insights from *Being and Nothingness*, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, and *The Transcendence of the Ego*, the paper traces how the protagonist represses her freedom by embracing illusions and other-directedness. Negotiating the denial of facticity to gradually acknowledging existential responsibility, the narrative presents a significant move toward authenticity. In this way, the novel affirms Sartre's proposition that existence precedes essence and that meaning will always be created through action.



Keywords— Existentialism; Bad faith; Authenticity; Being-for-others; Freedom and responsibility; Facticity.

The Cosmopolitans (2015) by Anjum Hasan brings to light the existential dilemmas faced by the protagonist, Qayenaat. Leading a solitary life, she often grapples with the burden of freedom, as if she does not wish to be held responsible for her own choices, and constantly denies her facticity by living in the existentialist bad faith. In this sense, “*The Cosmopolitans* is an intellectual novel and punctures with sophistication the eponymous quiet cosmopolitanism of its nature and structure” (Roy). Accordingly, her tumultuous relationships with Sathi, Sara, Baban, and the King reflect the inauthentic codes of her life. Apart from this, the suppression of her artistic passions, which concurrently seeks external validation to pursue them, foregrounds her existential hyphenation, signifying a yearning to turn towards art only as an escape from the brute facts of reality, re-examining “...an old question—the place of art in the mundane background of everyday life” (Misra). As a result, she refuses to acknowledge her loneliness and failing health. Such an existential stance highlights that the protagonist has an inclination to constantly repress her true feelings towards

herself/others. Her obsession with Baban, her problematic relationship with Sara and Sathi, her escape to Simhal (after the murder of Gyan Pai), and her posing as Mandakini for the King are some of the pointers as to how she deceives herself to escape the anxiety of the absolute freedom of her existence. Notably, it is towards the end of the narrative that she eventually refashions her existence through her altered choices to confront reality, manifesting a leap towards authenticity.

Facticity, Bad Faith, and the Illusion of Escape

In the beginning of the novel, Qayenaat is a woman who is deeply entangled by the facts of her existence. Her loneliness and nostalgia define her existence; she refuses to confront her reality, instead choosing to project her desires onto art, people, and her past. Haunted by regret, guilt, and unresolved emotions, she is alienated from society and lives a solitary life in a big mansion that she inherited from her father. At this juncture of the narrative, the protagonist is existentially saturated and desires to experience a qualitative difference in the way she exists, which she is not

sure of how to achieve. This section of the paper attempts to analyse her acts of self-deception and emotional volatility that are revealed through her relationships while also acknowledging the instances of her bad faith, fractured self, and desperate search for meaning. Qayenaat weaves *illusions* to avoid confronting the possibilities of her freedom. In doing so, she prefers to be surrounded by people who have a common liking for everything that she does. In Sartre's own words, "...the Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me. I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other" (*Being and Nothingness* 222). Apart from this, the existent "...lives in a constant interaction with other existents, or, to put the matter in another way, existence is being-[for]-others or being-with-one-another" (Macquaire 102). Her friend circle, which includes Sara Mir, her best friend; Baban, her former colleague with whom she is now obsessed; and Sathi Thakur, her ex-boyfriend, confirms this stance. To substantiate this argument, it is imperative to explore these relationships, and therefore it is necessary to turn to the Sara-Qayenaat relationship.

Interestingly, the protagonist's relationship with Sara is distant and transactional. She is quite jealous of Sara's wealth and at times borrows money from her to carry on with her not-so-luxurious life. A tinge of her jealousy is visible when "...she deftly stepped out of Sara's line of vision, leaning in towards the bar for a refill, and studied Sara secretly—her vivacious, art-loving friend, her jingle-jangle jewellery, and swishy skirts" (10), and "...nevertheless, they were friends" (52). This dualistic juxtaposition—the covert, envious temptation and the flat declaration of friendship—emphasizes the hollowness in their bond. What Qayenaat calls friendship is a fragile arrangement, held together more by habit and need than by genuine emotional closeness. This contrast also illustrates her tendency to mask complex feelings under simplified social labels, signifying the Sartrean bad faith. Further, the protagonist exhibits her bad faith when she gives Sara special credit for having the resources as well as the passion to be able to be qualified as an art lover, while she herself had the *choice* to use her potential to be a true artist and not blame the lack of resources in her life. She is insecure around Sara, considering her friend as "...the Kashmiri grand dame whose every gesture carried with it an aura of noblesse oblige. And Qayenaat, the hippie, the drifter, the moneyless orphan who couldn't get her head around basic things like fitness, love, and employment" (54). This comparison is steeped in Qayenaat's acute self-awareness of her social inadequacy, yet instead of prompting action, it reinforces her self-pity. The grandeur she attributes to Sara allows her to position herself as the perpetual outsider, thereby deflecting responsibility for her own inaction and

indulging in the Sartrean mode of fleeing her freedom. The protagonist's interpretation of Sara's silence as passive aggression reveals her tendency to project guilt and suspicion onto others rather than confront her discomfort directly. Macquarrie observes, "Even in the most fundamental ways of being, the human existent spills over, so to speak; he transcends the bounds of an individual existence and is intelligible only within a broader framework that we designate as being-[for]-others" (106). This is a form of self-deception wherein she displaces internal conflict onto imagined external hostility, further reinforcing her inauthentic existence. Sartre opines, "To be sure, the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth... in bad faith, it is from myself that I am hiding the truth" (*Being and Nothingness* 89). In this sense, this self-deception is a brief lapse where the consciousness catches itself in the act of concealment—a necessary step toward authenticity.

As for Baban, the protagonist first met him in Bombay while she was pursuing a degree in art and trying to establish a career in the field; however, she failed in it. At this time, Baban had feelings for her, which she never reciprocated. However, now, when she is desperately in love with him, he is so consumed within his art that the protagonist has to remind him to spare a thought for her. In this sense, she expands her hyphenation further as if she carries the weight of regret and remorse. She experiences a higher degree of existential distanciation when faced with the fact that Baban is in an active relationship with Tanya. She ruminates, "The man finds a woman. She could not tell her disappointment from her embarrassment" (18). Her unresolved desire for him complicates her anguish, and she fails to decode what she wants from him. Her longing for Baban reflects Sartre's concept of "being-for-others" (seeing oneself as objectified by another's view), where the self becomes defined by the gaze and judgment of another, denying one's own freedom. Accordingly, the protagonist consolidates her contradictions by claiming that "I could not have really loved you... You were no artist then, and it is the artist I love" (130). This revisionist understanding of her past emotions is an act of existential disavowal, which highlights a wishful reshaping of the past to suit a convenient present. Sartre warns against such self-deception, where one uses reason as a defense against emotional accountability.

Interestingly, her relationship with Sathi is also complex. He is an ex-boyfriend who still lingers in her life, providing occasional support but also representing the past she struggles to move away from. The contradiction between what she feels and what she chooses to act on underscores her unwillingness to acknowledge the value in stability—a classic case of self-division. In this sense, she is almost

using Sathi as a human shield against her emotional overflow. In other words, he also reminds her of her rootlessness, and she uses him for emotional support. Despite the fact that she is truly comfortable around him, she fails to acknowledge it, signifying her bad faith. Importantly, her reactions indicate that despite her denial of Sathi, she does crave companionship; however, she cannot fully commit to it without feeling it threatens her autonomy. This is how she drives him away as he tries to get closer, further showcasing her fleeing from her need of having a human well-wisher. When Sara gives her a reality check on the situation of Sathi asking her why he is in her house, the protagonist struggles to give an answer and says, "It's nice to meet someone from your past and know you don't owe each other anything" (56). This sentiment contradicts her actual emotional entanglement with Sathi, and this is a recurrent pattern in her life to have an unresolved liking or hatred towards a person. Seen thus, one experiences oneself as being subjected to the objectification by another subject since "...the Other constitutes me in a new type of being [by making me] his object... In it I recognize that, as the object of the Other, I am not only for the Other, that is, that I actually am just as the Other sees me" (Theunissen 222). Levy substantiates it further: "...all human relations can be resolved into this sinister dialectic of looking-at and being looked-at, of objectifying and being objectified in turn" (39).

Delving deeper, the protagonist exposes her existential cracks by other means also. She loves having her single name with no trace of roots. In this sense, she "...rejects stable identity and accepts fragmented and floating identity" (Islam 91). Consider the following textual extract: "At twenty she had dropped her last name simply because it was Gupta and there was no way to reconcile the ordinariness of Gupta with the sublimity of Qayenaat" (37). At the same time, she is attracted to Sathi because "...he so solidly belonged to a culture that had always seemed out of reach and ephemeral to her" (39), meaning thereby she needs roots too. Furthermore, her habit of smoking cigarettes is in itself a paradox, whereby she tries to escape her overwhelmed states of mind. Apart from this, she is in complete denial when it comes to her health, refusing to take proper treatments, and while feeling like she is on the verge of death, she panics and swallows a couple of pills all at once. She struggles financially yet refuses to perform 9-to-5 jobs, and one of the evils "...was her chronic unemployment, her inability to fit into the stranglehold of a 9-to-5" (31). Notably, her rejection of societal roles adds fuel to her existential cacophony. She is at a point in life where survival takes precedence over her true artistic aspirations in the sense that her need for financial survival overpowers her passion for art. She even attempts to

commit insurance fraud with Sathi; however, she fails to do so. Her failed attempt at such fraud signifies her inner conflict—though she briefly considers dishonesty, she ultimately resists full self-deception.

The murder of Gyan Pai is the culmination of the initial part of the narrative. After her argument with Baban, she visits Sara's house. Here, she overhears Sara and Baban talking about someone with a mean tone, and she assumes that to be her and leaves the place immediately. Her loneliness, created by her alienation, drives her delusion into believing that Sara and Baban are joining forces against her: "Baban and Sara, Sara and Baban, talking about her?" (134). This is where she decides to set Baban's 'Nostalgia' aflame, signifying his murder as an artist, and she goes on to justify it by stating that "I can be bad too" (141). This incident is also symbolic of her burnt desires for Baban. In addition, she acts so feeble over a minute misunderstanding that it causes the accidental death of Gyan Pai. On a critical note, Baban's 'Nostalgia' may be interpreted as an existential crisis for the protagonist. It manifests her breaking point where she loses control, which culminates in the tragic death of Gyan Pai. Although she doesn't have to confront immediate consequences, the guilt follows her. She realises upon talking to Sara that, "Yes, I ran away in misplaced fury and destroyed an artwork and killed a man for nothing but my despicable vanity" (164). In this context, this event solidifies her existential crisis and pushes her toward self-exile. She is now searching for something—perhaps redemption, peace, or meaning, which she thought she could attain from art—which leads her to Simhal, a place that promises art, history, and a chance for reinvention.

Alienation and the Search for Meaning

The narrative highlights that Qayenaat is alienated since the beginning of the novel. In her own words, "So this is what she was in essence—a woman alone, trying to make a living" (128). Her father's death is one of the major causes of her alienation. She has people like Sathi, Sara, and Baban, but they are not sufficient enough to complete her layered desires, and they all *lack* something that she desperately needs. As a consequence, they make her feel further alienated in her own world, making her look for alternatives, especially art (the Nur Jahan painting). Blanche "...was all she had" (86). Importantly, she also feels alienated from her artistic self, as she is filled with anguish due to her irrevocable love for Baban, as she fails to understand what she is feeling and is blown off the edge of her existence. Moreover, she struggles to claim any identity—artist, researcher, or journalist. She arrives in Simhal expecting to immerse herself in art, but her illusion shatters as she soon realises that the place is politically charged and not as peaceful as she had hoped. She wonders,

"How was it possible that the delicately sensuous dance she'd seen in Bangalore had emerged from a place as soulless as this?" (203). Interestingly, her disillusionment underscores her ongoing refusal to root meaning in her own engagement with the world.

In Simhal, she hates everything about the Modern Nritya Academy. She says that "...this place was modern both in name and appearance... and yet evoked utter neglect and boredom" (203). Her assessment of the institution reveals a deeper discontent—not with the place, but with herself. The neglected dance center may be interpreted as a projection of her own neglected interior life, yet she remains blind to the parallel. It seems as if she starts her journey towards authenticity when she wants to pursue art at Simhal; however, she is again trapped in bad faith by refusing to acknowledge and fix her loneliness and confront reality. She is yearning for unity between essence and existence—between what she does and who she is. However, her detachment from the dance and the people around it indicates that she is still unable to live this question authentically.

The protagonist's anguish manifests itself in making Mohanendra Simha (the King) a new source of fascination, even before meeting him in person, as "Qayenaat wanted to know more about this king" (200). Interestingly, this desire is not grounded in political curiosity but in existential projection—she sees the King as a possible anchor for her dislocated self. So, she is impressed by him at first glance: "And yet this man was obviously king. Despite the ordinary get-up—not a single gold bangle or peacock feather to hint at past glories—everything about him suggested stateliness" (228). His command of English also fascinates her, highlighting the fact that his fluency hints at her internalized cultural hierarchies, where linguistic command becomes a proxy for legitimacy and sophistication. By outsourcing esteem through such traits, she continues to nurture a temporary sense of self-worth, and such a temperament makes her fall quickly in love with the King.

For the purpose of preserving her delicate self-worth, she chooses to abandon her passion (dance) and yet again chooses to exist in bad faith. The King "...was her focus now. As was the dance. She had seen a genuine spirit in both, and she wanted to draw nearer to them" (247). As a result, returning to the congested dance center is now a burden to her, foreshadowing her readiness to leave the place once she gets an option to do so. As the King invites her to move to the palace, she readily agrees to do so as if she was waiting for such an invitation. Now, she projects her loneliness onto the King and his palace: "The King was a lonely man living in a grimy house, and he seemed eager

to share the story of his life" (241), not realising that she is describing herself through him and his palace. Apart from this, she feels pity for him upon seeing that all that remained from his glorious past were bits of memories, placing him in the same position as her. She is in denial about the fact that she is old when she projects the King as way too old for her. She also feels connected to the King, as he makes her believe that he understands her better than anyone else.

Notably, the King's agency lies in resonating with her a purpose she hasn't clearly defined herself, and this is how the protagonist accepts his words, not because they represent truth, but because they offer structure. Given the fact that her alienation has made her want to connect with people, it encourages her to do the same with the King, i.e., to find something in common: "They had something in common. She could play a part in his mission, joining her love of the dance to his dreams for it" (246). Her fascination with the King represents another attempt at escapism in the sense that she embraces a new identity in an effort to shed her past: "He'd given her a new name, thereby cancelling out her background" (314). Superficially, this cancellation of background may appear liberating, but it also acts as a self-erasure. Instead of confronting her past actions and choices, she craves an existential amnesty by indulging in a roleplay, which, in existential terms, is an abandonment of self-authorship. Consequently, she allows herself to be redefined as 'Mandakini, a signifier of her existential abdication. Sartre states, "Most important, consciousness is not the ego. The ego is not inside consciousness but outside it... the ego is the object of consciousness" (*The Transcendence of the Ego* 9). Concurrently, this renaming symbolizes an attempt to erase her old identity and past sins, along with her readiness to belong somewhere for once: "The important thing now was to make the transition from Qayenaat to Mandakini, or rather to complete it, for she was already half there" (309). Sartre would see this as a definitive gesture of bad faith—she is not choosing her identity but rather sliding into one offered by circumstance/manipulation. Now, she can recognize herself as someone who has nothing to do with Gyan Pai's murder or with Qayenaat and be royalty, escaping her guilt through a fake identity. However, deep inside, she identifies herself as the murderer.

The King, an embodiment of authority and tradition, represents the weight of institutionalized power, and this is how he contrasts with Sartre's call for individual authenticity. As already established, the protagonist repeatedly comforts herself by following someone else, ruling her life, "I'm hopeless, she thought. But it's true. With him, I'm happy. And what about him?" (294). In this sense, the King performs the role of a comforter to her

existential needs. She believes that she is capable of managing everything on her own, while it is constantly proven that she has relied on Sathi, Sara, Baban, or her father. However, she is slowly getting mature, and she begins to see the reality of people suffering around her, especially through Malti's story, and acknowledges the cruelty of the government. It also enables her to confront privilege and naivety; she is in good faith when she realises that there are things that she does not understand until she experiences them.

Interestingly, in *Simhal*, she gravitates towards Shiva because of the King's cultural practices and her subconscious desire to please him. In an attempt to please him and become the version that he likes, she feels that "...perhaps it was time to turn to Shiva, confront her fear of this unpredictable god-man. Time to give up worldliness, forget the burden of dharma, and focus on moksha, breaking free" (312). She initially finds the rituals and sacrifices horrifying but slowly rationalizes them, falling again to the depths of bad faith. Apparently, she is so desperately fixated on the King that she doesn't realize that she is going against her own morals. Despite the fact that she is irritated by the killing of the goats during the sacrifice, "Yet again her thoughts flew to love, her whole being inclined that way" (330). Her readiness to normalize ritual violence in exchange for affection and stability signifies an ethical compromise.

She eventually experiences awakening during the sacrificial ritual where she finds her moment of existential clarity; she sees that she has once again relinquished her agency: "Standing there facing an inscrutable king, a tortured man who actually seemed to enjoy it— yes, that was the word—playing a beast, and the tough on whose breath was the raw smell of liquor, Qayenaat felt more vulnerable than she ever had in her life" (334). This is the moment where her illusions begin to collapse. Her vulnerability signals an impending rupture, which signifies a step toward reclaiming her own gaze and judgment. The king participates in a disturbing ritual where a man is hooked to a cart through his flesh and pulls the King about what she feels: "We cannot mistreat people on the pretext of some old story, regardless of what lies they themselves believe in" (339). Here, for the first time, she affirms a moral position, which represents a potent turn towards existential authenticity. She now chooses to listen to herself and comes to an acceptance of her worth, realizing, "She was clearly up against a madman. He'd tried to put on a show for her when she was already won over... he seemed bent on converting her; she wasn't good enough as she was" (352). As a result, she now understands that she has no real agency in the palace—she is merely another captive, like those before her, with the realization that

"They'd planned this (holding her captive) even before the innocent thought of taking a walk had occurred to her" (354). She realises that she is truly alone in this vast universe and that there is no way to escape this loneliness other than acknowledging and embracing it.

Freedom, Responsibility, and Authenticity

The moment of escape from *Simhal* is pivotal because it makes Qayenaat actively choose freedom, fully embracing the consequences of her past actions. She now *accepts*, and this internal moment of reckoning shows her initial acknowledgement of the hardship required in her pursuit of freedom. She ruminates that "...the harder thing was acknowledging that her adventure in *Simhal* was over, that the King was no longer someone she could trust" (355), marking a turn towards self-reliance. Sartre opines, "Man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself; yet once hurled into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (*Existentialism Is a Humanism* 29). She is glad to have heard her *real* name from Sathi, reclaiming her forgotten identity. This is a moment of existential awakening, and she now understands that she has been projecting her loneliness onto others, seeking escape in illusions rather than facing her reality. Sartre argues that authenticity requires the acceptance of one's facticity (the given facts of one's situation) while exercising radical freedom, and this is what Qayenaat finally aspires to achieve: "In a word, man must create his own essence: it is in throwing himself into the world, suffering there, struggling there, that he gradually defines himself" (*Existentialism Is a Humanism* 50).

Importantly, the adoption of Chota symbolizes existential responsibility in the sense that she no longer seeks meaning externally but creates meaning through action. As a result, taking care of Chota becomes a transformative experience for her. She realises that this boy "...comes from a world where too much has been screwed up already... [and] I need to be clear in my head for his sake" (372). Chota's innocence facilitates her maturity, and it is through him that she sees the world without any prejudice. She no longer seeks *moksha* through escape but finds peace in the mundane reality of life. Also, she is ready to pick up on 9-5 jobs, which she initially hated, in order to feed her family of two. She finds a solution to her loneliness, which is evident when she tells him that "...you are the only reason I have not to cry" (377). She now understands that happiness is not about grand escapes or intense passion but about small, everyday moments.

In *The Cosmopolitans*, Qayenaat's psychological and existential evolution reflects a profound engagement with Sartrean existentialism, particularly the transformation from bad faith to authenticity. Her life, characterized by

emotional instability, fractured relationships, artistic struggle, and a perpetual refusal to confront the truth of her existence, unfolds as a narrative of existential 'becoming.' At the heart of this narrative lies a persistent denial of facticity, and this denial manifests in her jealous, dependent relationships with others, her nostalgic fixation on past opportunities lost, and her tendency to romanticize her suffering. Qayenaat constructs a self-image grounded in illusions and self-deceptions, thereby avoiding the discomfiting freedom of choice and the accompanying responsibility that authentic existence demands. Further, her descent into violence—culminating in the burning of Baban's *Nostalgia* and the subsequent accidental death of Gyan Pai—marks the climactic rupture of her existential stasis. Such acts, driven by paranoia and emotional volatility, foreground the breakdown of her illusions. Now, she confronts her with the absurdity of her existence, which runs parallel to Sartre's notion that human freedom is both a burden and a source of authenticity. The murder acts as a moment of existential awakening, and for the first time, she is forced to confront her own capacity for destruction. This leads to a kind of exile that is not merely geographical, as seen in her departure to Simhal, but existential, as she searches for a more grounded sense of meaning.

As a consequence, the final trajectory of Qayenaat's journey highlights a shift towards authenticity. However, she does not undergo a linear transformation; rather, her movement toward accepting her *freedom* is the first code of her existential agency. Notably, the novel does not offer a definitive conclusion regarding her redemption or transformation; it leaves open the possibility of self-reinvention. It is in this openness, this embrace of the absurd condition of human life, that she begins to embody the existential subject. Earnshaw says, "...self in Existentialism is an uncompleted project, a potential for which each individual is solely responsible for realizing or unfolding" (19). Ultimately, *The Cosmopolitans* can be read as a narrative of existential awakening, where meaning is not found but created through the difficult process of self-confrontation. In this light, *The Cosmopolitans* stands as a powerful illustration of existential literature, affirming that the path to authenticity, though fraught with pain and uncertainty, remains open to those who dare to choose it.

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