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Existence beyond Deities: Unraveling Existential Secularist Threads in *Padma Nadir Majhi* and *The Outsider*

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Abstract: *With no divine guidance, people must figure out their own existence and what ultimately gives their uncertain lives meaning. Manik Bandopadhyay's* Padma Nadir Majhi *(1936) and Albert Camus's* The Outsider *(1942) reflect this thought in different social and cultural contexts. Each narrative underscores the contextual influences that determine human ethical choices. The main purpose of this study is to examine the character analysis of the two novels and how they face the fundamental questions of life, even amid social unrest, economic uncertainty, and deep personal conflicts. The contrasting historical realities of rural Bengal and post-war France shapes their responses. Yet, both works reflect a persistent struggle with alienation, absurdity, and the search for significance in a secular modern world. By situating these texts within the frameworks of existentialism and secularism, the paper highlights how Bandopadhyay and Camus effectively depict the crises of human existence and the ongoing attempts to affirm meaning in a disenchanted reality.*

Keywords: existentialism, secularism, alienation, absurdity

Introduction

Human beings across societies wrestle with decisions that shape their identities and sense of purpose. In a world where tradition, culture, and religion no longer dictate every choice, individuals must define their own purpose, navigate moral dilemmas, and take responsibility for their actions. Existentialist thought, rooted in the idea that "existence precedes essence," conveys the concept of human freedom and responsibility in a world without inherent purpose (Sartre, 1948/1946, p. 29). In Bengal, Ahmed Sofa articulated secularism as a humanist principle that upholds dignity, ethical reasoning, and intellectual freedom while remaining attentive to the lived realities of ordinary people shaped by culture and poverty (*New Age*, 2016).

In the broad field of literary research, existentialism and secularism have often been studied as separate domains. While much attention has been given to existentialist themes in Western literature and to secularism in political and cultural contexts, little consideration has been given to the ways these two perspectives can be read together as a single approach for literary analysis, particularly in the context of Bengali literature. By blending these frameworks into the idea of "existential secularism," this research

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introduces a perspective not yet fully developed in literary studies, especially in South Asian contexts.

The present study addresses this gap by examining *Padma Nadir Majhi* and *The Outsider* through the combined lens of existentialism and secularism. Its main objective is to compare how the two texts portray human life in the absence of divine authority and to explore the cultural differences in their representation of existential struggles. To pursue this objective, the research is guided by questions such as: How do the protagonists deal with freedom, alienation, and the search for meaning in worlds without divine guidance? How do the settings of rural Bengal in *Padma Nadir Majhi* and colonial Algeria in *The Outsider* shape and intensify their dilemmas? And in what ways do both writers use narrative strategies such as faith and doubt to express existential ideas within a secular frame? By pursuing these questions, the study develops a comparative framework that demonstrates how writers from distinct traditions converge in their portrayal of the struggles of human life beyond religion.

Literature Review

Like *Padma Nadir Majhi* and *The Outsider*, numerous novels explore themes of existential secularism, as well as others such as absurdity, alienation, freedom and responsibility, authenticity, existential angst, death and mortality, and the search for meaning. Despite extensive individual scholarship, there remains a notable lack of comparative studies that directly examine them together. To situate this research, it is first necessary to review the broader intellectual and literary contexts in which existentialist secular thought developed.

Beginning with the Western tradition, existentialism and secularism emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, amid the decline of religious authority and the rise of modern science. Nietzsche (1974/1882) proclaimed, “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (p. 125), a declaration that signals the end of the traditional moral order and opens the way to nihilism and isolation. Radical theologians in the 1960s interpreted this shift as evidence of secular culture and urged a rethinking of faith in a world without transcendence (David, 2024, pp. 2–6). David points out that mainstream theology failed to respond meaningfully, losing the chance to explore new paths of belief and existence. From a modern perspective, it is seen not only as a crisis but also as an opportunity to embrace human limits and seek meaning.

A key example is Karl Jaspers’s notion of philosophical faith, which builds on explorations of existence outside religious frameworks. Wildermuth (2007) observes that Jaspers rejects rigid dogma and interprets spiritual truths through human freedom and rational self-understanding, thereby opening a secular dimension of existential thought (pp. 16–17). This emphasis is echoed by Beauvoir (1985/1947), who writes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, “To attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it” (p. 13). Her position underscores the existentialist and secular view that human beings cannot depend on transcendence to define their essence but must instead embrace ambiguity and take responsibility for creating meaning within the limits of finite life.

Extending this foundation, Albert Camus’ philosophy becomes especially vivid after the Second World War, when traditional values were collapsing and disillusionment

was widespread. Camus rejected religious consolation, insisting instead on human dignity, freedom, and accountability (Bamane, 2014, pp. 23–24). In *The Outsider* (1942), Meursault embodies this stance by refusing redemption through God and accepting the consequences of his actions (p. 25). Bamane argues that this denial of divine intervention reflects Camus's concern with free will, choice, and responsibility, while awareness of death allows individuals to affirm life's value and beauty (pp. 26–27).

Li (2024) offers a complementary view, showing that Meursault resists society's consolations, such as religious salvation or moral righteousness, and instead accepts the absurdity of life through silence (pp. 506). This confrontation with mortality, he explains, demonstrates a freedom achieved without reliance on divine authority. Taken together, Bamane and Li stress Meursault's rejection of religious reassurance and his confrontation with death, though the former situates him in a historical context emphasizing dignity, while the latter underscores social critique and the acceptance of absurdity. Collectively, these studies shed light on Camus's treatment of mortality and meaning, yet they do not fully consider how secular orientations reshape existential thought. This study moves into that space by treating secularism not as background context but as an active lens for reinterpreting existence.

Shifting to the Bengali context, Sen (2020) shows that in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengal, travel became an autonomous cultural practice shaped by a new worldview (p. 5). These secular journeys moved beyond pilgrimage and opened spaces for identity-making outside of religion. Such narratives, marked by binaries like "we/they" and "home/world" (p. 4) echo existentialist concerns about selfhood in relation to the other. Inn *Deshe Bideshe*, Syed Mujtaba Ali even discovers parts of his "self" in every mores and manners about this "home away from home" (p. 11), reflecting a secular humanist and existential orientation relevant to the present study. If Sen shows secular modernity through outward journeys, Jibanananda Das turns this search inward. In his poems, solitude becomes the place where a person faces inner emptiness and takes responsibility for creating meaning without divine help. Building on this idea, Biswarup Das (2019) shows that Jibanananda's work explores the struggles of existence, where a true sense of self appears only when one steps away from the crowd. This realization also brings a heavy burden, since in solitude a person faces inner emptiness and must take full responsibility for creating meaning in life without any divine support (p. 32). Finally, Jibanananda's vision is captured in his idea that life, time, and the universe ultimately hold a single meaning: "The way itself is all" (p. 31), a thought that reflects the search for existence beyond deities and fixed religious beliefs.

Adding another comparative dimension, Sattar and Rafi (2014) examine Syed Waliullah's *Chander Amabasya* alongside Camus's *The Outsider* to show how both texts portray protagonists trapped in absurd realities where divine assurance is absent. They argue that "history and society are merciless to their protagonists, leaving them to struggle with life's meaninglessness" (p. 870), which resonates with the existential condition of living without transcendental guarantees. In *Chander Amabasya*, Arif Ali faces religious manipulation within a colonial village, while in *The Outsider*, Meursault confronts the indifference of a colonial court; yet both characters arrive at an awareness of absurdity and the necessity of constructing meaning beyond deities. While these works establish the importance of secular modernity, existential solitude, and absurd

realities, they do not pursue the comparative potential of reading Bengali and Western texts together.

Kantha and Bhattacharya (2020) explain that in *Padma Nadir Majhi*, the fishermen's struggle comes mainly from poverty, hunger, and social oppression, not from questions of faith. Here, existence is depicted in practical terms, with survival itself as the primary concern. The authors point out that God is absent from the fishermen's lives, so meaning has to be found through human effort, emotions, and relationships. This shows a secular form of existentialism, where life is defined by material and social realities. Such a reading makes an important contrast with Camus' *The Outsider*, where the existential crisis comes from facing absurdity and rejecting religious comfort. Extending this discussion, Dasgupta (2021) explains that Manik Bandyopadhyay presents "an existential crisis that becomes inseparable from political disposition as the commitment to masses guarding against individual compromise, even at the cost of life" (p. 147). In this way, his conception of existence transcends personal despair and emphasizes social responsibility to support the oppressed. While existentialism has been widely studied in both Western and Bengali contexts, research on secularism in Bengali literature remains limited. Furthermore, the blending of existentialism and secularism into a single analytical framework has not yet been attempted. By addressing this gap, the present study not only introduces a new approach to reading Padma Nadir Majhi and The Outsider but also expands the scope of comparative literary studies by connecting Bengali modernity with global philosophical debates.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, using literary analysis and close reading to examine how existentialism and secularism intersect in *Padma Nadir Majhi* by Manik Bandyopadhyay and *The Outsider* by Albert Camus. Since the research is philosophical and literary rather than empirical, interpretive methods are best suited to uncover the thematic complexities embedded in the narratives.

The two novels are selected for their shared concern with human existence and the absence of divine authority, though they emerge from very different cultural and historical contexts. Camus places the individual at the center of the absurd condition, presenting meaning as elusive and uncertain. Bandyopadhyay, by contrast, anchors similar questions in a Bengali setting where collective realities and material life shape the search for meaning. Juxtaposing these texts makes it possible to trace how existential and secular dimensions are articulated across cultural boundaries.

Guiding the analysis draws on central ideas from existentialism, such as absurdity, alienation, freedom, and responsibility, together with secularist thought that highlights human-centered meaning making. These concepts are applied to examine how Meursault in *The Outsider* and Kuber in *Padma Nadir Majhi* embody different responses to the conditions of life they confront. A hermeneutic orientation frames the process, emphasizing interpretation and understanding to reach beneath the surface of narrative events.

Along with the primary texts, the research engages a range of secondary sources, including books, journal articles, and scholarly essays on existentialism, secularism,

and literary theory. These materials provide conceptual background and critical insights that situate the novels within both global and regional intellectual traditions.

Existence in transition: Navigating faith, doubt, and secular shifts in *Padma Nadir Majhi* and *The Outsider*

This section explores how existential challenges, the interplay of faith and doubt, and shifts toward secular understanding shape human experience in *Padma Nadir Majhi* and *The Outsider*. To clarify their distinct yet interconnected approaches, each novel is examined separately.

Secular existence and the dilemmas of faith and doubt in *Padma Nadir Majhi*

Manik Bandyopadhyay (1908–1956) presents the lives of East Bengal's riverine people with a raw realism shaped by his deep familiarity with the landscape. Fishing continues throughout the night on the Padma, illuminated by streaks of lightning across the sky. Despite the intimidating appearance of the river and its natural hazards, the villagers persist in their livelihood. Among them is a small group of men, such as Dhananjay, who owns the boat and nets, while Kuber and Ganesh work with him as helpers. Whatever they catch, Dhananjay takes two-thirds, and the others share the rest. Their daily work revolves around fishing; they sit in the boat on the Padma, casting nets. Some days they return with plenty; other days, with nothing, struggling against the arbitrariness of fate and often facing the upper-class landowners. As Bandyopadhyay writes, "The longing for birth is profound here, in this joyless, desolate life where the taste of existence is only in hunger and thirst, desire in hunger, selfishness in a state of decay" (Bandyopadhyay, 1948, p. 11).

The fishermen's lives depend entirely on how many fish the river yields; they cannot rely on divine intervention for survival. Their fate lies in the uncertain balance between nature's generosity and exploitation by the wealthy, whose kindness could improve their condition more than any prayer. Thus, existence here is defined not by God's will but by labor, poverty, and human relations, where secular endurance replaces faith as the ground of life.

Kuber emerges as the central figure through whom Bandyopadhyay illustrates the precarious balance between existence, doubt, and survival. A native of Ketupur, he makes a living by catching hilsa from the Padma River. When the hilsa season ends, he turns to shallow-water fishing to support his family, including his disabled wife, Mala, and their children. At the beginning of the novel, Kuber depends entirely on his physical strength, even at the cost of his own health, yet his efforts bring little dignity. He is relentlessly judged, whether by the boat owner Dhananjay or by passersby, leaving him humiliated and unemployed. As Bandyopadhyay observes, "In his sleep, Kuber's eyes long to light up, while in his moments of despair, his eyes wish to be filled with tears of anger and sorrow. Among the poor, he is poorer, among the small, even smaller" (Bandyopadhyay, 1948, p. 9). Kuber's journey reflects the existential weight of poverty, where faith offers no refuge, doubt permeates daily life, and human endurance becomes the only ground on which existence can stand. He is shown as the poorest among the poor, a life marked by alienation and endless struggle.

Manik Bandyopadhyay portrays the village life of Ketupur, where poverty, not religion, is the decisive force shaping existence. Hindus and Muslims live side by side, sharing daily struggles of farming, fishing, and trade, with little distinction in their way of life. As the narrator states, "Everyone, more or less, practices a greater irreligion than religion: poverty. If there is ever any dispute, it is completely personal, and it rarely lasts long" (Bandyopadhyay, 1948, p. 39).

This observation makes clear that survival overrides sectarian boundaries. Faith here is not expressed through temples, mosques, or ritual observance, but through the mutual trust and cooperation that allow the community to endure hardship together. When men are absent from households, women take on public responsibilities, illustrating how interdependence sustains the rhythm of life. Even quarrels, whether between Kuber and Siddhu, Aminuddi and Johar, or Kuber and Aminuddi, remain minor and are quickly resolved, never escalating into communal conflict. In this way, Bandyopadhyay shows that poverty itself functions as the "greater irreligion," binding people together across religious lines. Existence in this riverine society is thus defined less by divine authority and more by human solidarity, where the struggle to survive becomes the community's truest act of faith.

Kuber's wife, Mala's, existential journey unfolds against the backdrop of her physical disability, which confines her within the home and limits her role in family life. Despite her wish to contribute, she is sidelined by both circumstance and social expectation. The arrival of her sister Kapila deepens Mala's sense of inadequacy, leaving her frustrated and alienated. Unable to fulfill the traditional roles of wife and mother, she experiences doubt about her own worth and the meaning of her existence. Her silent struggle captures the existential themes of alienation and angst as she wrestles with identity and the search for purpose within her constrained world.

The secular outlook in Padma Nadir Majhi is most vividly expressed through Hossain Miya, whose impartiality, compassion, and inclusivity set him apart. Outwardly, he appears as a conventional Munshi Molla of Noakhali, marked by traditional dress, a beard, and the use of henna, yet these are only external signs. Internally, he rejects superficial religious rituals, avoids discussion of dogma, and instead approaches life with a pragmatic vision. His dream of Maynadweep is imagined as a place where people can begin anew, free from old conflicts and divisions. As the novel observes, "Everyone is surprised to hear. Kuber has never heard about Maynadweep from Hossain before, but today he mentions it, expressing his excitement" (Bandyopadhyay, 1948, p. 120). Having acquired the island through a lease, Hossain devotes his resources to resettling people and building a community free from narrow divisions. When Mr. Aziz suggests constructing a mosque and limiting Hindu land, he rejects the idea, insisting that no temples or mosques should be built so that harmony is preserved. For him, Maynadweep represents the possibility of a new society based on human solidarity and inclusiveness rather than on religious institutions. In this vision, Bandyopadhyay presents Hossain as a figure of extraordinary will and imagination, whose secular outlook emphasizes humanistic values and communal harmony over sectarian divides. At the same time, this envisioned community reveals an existential dimension, as he seeks to redefine life's purpose through collective renewal rather than through religious tradition.

Existence in a Secular Realm and the Challenges of Faith and Doubt in *The Outsider*

Albert Camus (1913–1960) grew up in colonial Algiers, where the realities of social inequality and cultural diversity shaped his intellectual formation. These early encounters with injustice, identity, and belonging informed his lifelong engagement with the human condition and the ethical dilemmas of oppression and resistance. In his famous novel *The Outsider* (1942), he explores alienation, absurdity, and existentialism through the character of Meursault, who confronts the indifference of the universe, resists the pressure of social convention, and embodies a secular outlook that rejects religious consolation in favor of authenticity. One of the central questions of existentialism, how individuals approach the life they find themselves living, finds resonance in Omar Khayyam's famous lines:

"Beyond the earth, beyond the farthest skies, I try to find Heaven and Hell. Then I hear a solemn Voice that says: 'Heaven and hell are inside." (Khayyam, n.d.)

This poem underscores the turn from external faith to inner awareness. The idea that "Heaven and Hell are inside" directly connects to Meursault's refusal to follow mourning rituals, as his response shows that meaning and suffering depend not on religion but on his own inner state. Meursault embodies this shift most starkly in his response to his mother's death: "When the caretaker asked, 'Don't you want to?" Meursault answered, "No." When pressed with "Why not?" he could only reply, "I don't know" (Camus, 2019, p. 6). His refusal to look at his mother's body, his embarrassment at giving an unconventional answer, and his final admission of "I don't know" all emphasize his estrangement from ritual, faith, and socially sanctioned mourning. Rather than engaging in religious or cultural practices that promise meaning, he confronts death with uncertainty and indifference. In doing so, Meursault illustrates existential doubt at its most intimate level while simultaneously affirming a secular outlook grounded in authenticity and individual freedom. Through this moment, Camus portrays existence as a continual negotiation between doubt, the absence of faith, and the search for meaning in an indifferent world.

Marie and Meursault's relationship in *The Outsider* exposes the tension between faith in traditional values and the doubt that arises from an existential worldview. Marie approaches love and marriage with a sense of faith, believing that emotional commitment can give meaning and stability to life. Meursault, however, regards both love and union with indifference, questioning their value and refusing to conform to social expectations. When she asks if he loves her, he replies, "It didn't mean anything but that I probably didn't. 'Why marry me then?' she asked. I explained that it really didn't matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married" (Camus, 2019, p. 38). This response not only rejects the significance of love but also reflects his secular distance from institutions like marriage, which are historically tied to religious and social norms. For him, the decision to commit carries no deeper purpose beyond Marie's request, showing that he assigns no transcendent or moral weight to the act itself. Their exchange illustrates the existential condition of existence in transition, where one person seeks fulfillment through faith in human connection while the other exposes the absurdity of such expectations through doubt and detachment. The silence that follows Marie's disappointment captures this clash most vividly, grounding the philosophical tension in the reality of their fragile bond.

In the scene where Meursault shoots the Arab, Camus presents a turning point that exposes the fragility of human existence. Meursault recalls, "I realized that I'd destroyed the balance of the day and the perfect silence of the beach where I'd been happy" (Camus, 2019, p. 54). This moment does not express guilt in a religious or moral sense but shows how easily harmony can collapse and how fleeting happiness really is. His description of the repeated shots as "sharp knocks at the door of unhappiness" reveals an awareness that suffering and disorder are unavoidable parts of life. The scene looks ahead to his final realization of the "benign indifference of the universe," where he accepts life without divine meaning or certainty. In this way, the murder scene reflects the movement of existence away from faith in fixed values, through doubt about human actions, toward a secular awareness of life's absurdity and the fragile nature of human existence.

The prison chaplain's visit in The Outsider clearly brings out the clash of faith and doubt at the heart of the novel. Holding a silver cross, the chaplain passionately declares his belief in God's mercy, insisting that "he believed in God, that he was convinced that no man was so guilty that God wouldn't pardon him, but that he must first repent and so become like a child whose soul is empty and ready to embrace everything" (Camus, 2019, p. 61). For him, life's meaning rests in faith, repentance, and the promise of divine forgiveness. Meursault, however, rejects this vision, doubting not only the chaplain's words but the very idea of God and salvation. What the chaplain sees as eternal hope, Meursault views as an illusion. His refusal to repent marks a secular shift, as he chooses authenticity over religious consolation. In this moment, existence itself is laid bare: the chaplain embodies faith in divine authority, while Meursault embraces doubt and accepts life and death within an indifferent universe.

Meursault asserts a deeply philosophical viewpoint. By refusing his boss's proposition and expressing contentment with his present life, he embodies an existentialist perspective on fulfillment and the acceptance of life's uncertainties. "He then asked me if I wasn't interested in changing my life! I replied that you could never change your life, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn't at all dissatisfied with mine here" (Camus, 2019, p. 38). His claim that "one life was as good as another" reflects the existentialist conviction that human existence has no inherent hierarchy of value and must be lived subjectively. This refusal to pursue ambition or conventional success reveals his commitment to authenticity and individual freedom in the face of social expectations. Meursault's awareness that his former aspirations as a student held no lasting significance further emphasizes the absurdity of ambition and the difficulty of locating fixed meaning in an indifferent universe. Instead of equating freedom with upward mobility or external achievement, he situates it in the ability to remain true to one's own experience of life. In doing so, Meursault shows that genuine autonomy arises not from conformity to societal ideals but from the courage to embrace existence on one's own terms, even when such authenticity isolates the individual from others.

Comparative Analysis of *Padma Nadir Majhi* and *The Outsider*

Both Manik Bandyopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi* and Albert Camus's *The Outsider* engage with existentialist secularism, a worldview that seeks meaning through reason, lived experience, and ethical reflection rather than religious faith. By placing their characters against the indifference of nature and society, the novels invite readers to

confront mortality, freedom, and authenticity within secular frameworks. Examining these structural and symbolic dimensions allows for a deeper understanding of their distinct yet converging contributions to existential thought.

Manik Bandyopadhyay and Albert Camus critique society in different ways. In *Padma Nadir Majhi*, Bandopadhyay portrays the endless suffering of the impoverished villagers of Jelepada, whose lives are shaped by poverty, exploitation, and natural calamities. People like Shital Babu, who have no wealth, are manipulated by the powerful, while even the boatmen take advantage of them for survival. Their homes are destroyed in storms, the floods engulf their land, and sickness and death remain constant companions, suggesting that both society and nature have abandoned them. This social disparity is sharply expressed in the line, "God is present in that village, Bhadrapalli" (Bandyopadhyay, 1948, p. 11), where "Bhadrapalli" symbolizes the wealthy quarters that receive protection and privilege, unlike Jelepada. Through this contrast, Bandopadhyay critiques an unjust order in which the rich prosper while the poor remain trapped in misery. In *The Outsider*, Camus critiques society by exposing how it judges individuals not on their actual actions but on their conformity to social expectations. Meursault is condemned less for the crime of killing a man and more for failing to show the "appropriate" emotions at his mother's funeral, which brands him as dangerous in the eyes of others. The judicial system, instead of focusing on the factual crime, uses his indifference and lack of conventional morality as evidence against him. Through this, Camus shows how society enforces conformity and punishes those who refuse to abide by its norms, revealing that justice often serves to maintain social morality rather than ensure fairness.

Beyond their critiques of society, both authors also explore how individuals negotiate authenticity in the face of social or religious pressures. Meursault's exchange with his lawyer during the trial reflects his refusal to compromise authenticity for the sake of social or legal advantage. When his lawyer advises him to show grief to win sympathy, Meursault explains that, "The lawyer interrupted me, looking very flustered. He made me promise not to say that at the hearing or in front of the examining magistrate. But I explained to him that by nature my physical needs often distorted my feelings" (Camus, 2019, p. 59). His unwillingness to pretend emotions demonstrates a secular outlook rooted in truth rather than conformity to external expectations. A similar perspective is found in *Padma Nadir Majhi*, where Kuber reflects on the dignity of labor and the futility of sectarian divisions during his journey with Hossain Miya. Observing the unity among boatmen, he states, "Those who earn their livelihood by tilling the soil in the village of land, they have differences in their religion, while the boatmen of the Padma River, they are all of one religion" (Bandyopadhyay, 1948, p. 118). This reflection shows Kuber's commitment to equality and solidarity, suggesting that shared human struggle carries more value than religious identity. Both Meursault and Kuber highlight secular and existential perspectives through their rejection of imposed conventions. While Meursault refuses to perform contrived emotions in a courtroom that demands conformity, Kuber disregards sectarian divides to affirm the common humanity of those who live and labor by the river. Together, their outlooks underscore that authenticity, dignity, and human connection matter more than adherence to artificial social or religious boundaries.

The idea of "existence beyond deities" unfolds in both *Padma Nadir Majhi* and *The Outsider*, though in distinct dimensions. In *Padma Nadir Majhi*, human existence is

tied to collective survival within harsh socio-economic conditions. Instead of repeating earlier details of exploitation, Bandyopadhyay shifts focus to the material limits of space and resources. He portrays the congested settlement of Jelepara, where, despite vast expanses of land, the fishermen remain bound by scarcity and unequal ownership:

In this world where space is not lacking, yet their heads are bowed in that little space they have. The ownership of the mostly flat land is widespread, making it difficult to expand the surroundings of Jelepara. Another house can only be built on another piece of land, squeezed between existing ones. This practice has been going on for generations. As a result, Jelepara has become crowded with houses, packed closely together. (Bandyopadhyay, 1948, pp. 10,11)

The scene reflects how survival, not divine intervention, dictates their choices, situating freedom in the material struggle against poverty, hunger, and exploitation. By contrast, in The Outsider, existential freedom is not about shared survival but the solitary confrontation of an individual with meaninglessness. Meursault articulates this detachment when reflecting on his mother's death: "I probably loved my mother quite a lot, but that didn't mean anything." (Camus, 2019, p. 58). His refusal to attach transcendent meaning to emotions underscores a secular outlook where authenticity lies in acknowledging life's indifference. In this way, Padma Nadir Majhi situates freedom within the collective struggles of poverty and survival, whereas The Outsider frames it within the solitary awareness of an individual facing the indifference of existence.

In Padma Nadir Majhi, the river Padma functions as a powerful symbol of both survival and destruction. It provides the fishermen with their livelihood, yet at the same time, it repeatedly devastates their lives through floods and storms. This duality embodies the precarious condition of the villagers, who remain dependent on a force that nurtures them even as it endangers their very existence. In Camus's novel, the sun dominates Meursault's experiences, from the oppressive heat at his mother's funeral to the blinding glare that contributes to the killing on the beach. He recalls: "The light leapt up off the steel… my eyes were blinded… all I could feel were the cymbals the sun was clashing against my forehead" (Camus, 2019, p. 53). The sun here symbolizes the oppressive weight of existence, blinding and overwhelming Meursault until his action becomes almost inevitable. Viewed side by side, the river and the sun reveal how nature, whether through water or fire, sustains and destroys, nurtures and oppresses, and ultimately shapes human destiny in ways that remain beyond human control.

The final scenes of *Padma Nadir Majhi* and *The Outsider* both deal with the inevitability of human fate, though they resolve this question in very different ways, shaped by their cultural and philosophical settings. In Bandyopadhyay's novel, the story ends with Kuber leaving Jelepara to sail for Maynadweep under the guidance of Hossain Miya. Significantly, he does not take his wife and children but chooses to go with Kapila, a decision that reveals both his personal desire and his break from conventional morality. This departure carries no assurance of a better life, since Maynadweep may hold the same poverty and hardship as the village he leaves behind. Yet, Kuber's choice to embrace uncertainty shows an openness to risk, suggesting that survival and renewal can sometimes come through defiance of social norms as well as through endurance. In contrast, Camus ends *The Outsider* with Meursault awaiting execution in prison. After living indifferently to society's expectations, Meursault finally confronts death and achieves clarity by recognizing life's absurdity. Instead of

resisting his fate, he accepts it and finds harmony with the universe's detachment. Camus ends the novel with Meursault's final realization:

I laid myself open for the first time to the benign indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother, really—I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again. For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less lonely, all that remained to hope was that on the day of my execution, there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with cries of hatred (Camus, 2019, p. 117). Meursault embraces the world's detachment as something that mirrors his own way of living. Instead of feeling deprived, he looks back and considers his life to have been fulfilled. Death no longer appears terrifying once he admits its inevitability for all people. At that point, a quiet sense of freedom settles over him as he awaits the end. Both novels depict characters moving toward an unavoidable fate, Kuber toward an uncertain future through an ethically ambiguous new beginning, and Meursault toward the certainty of death through lucid acceptance. Still, their resolutions differ: *Padma Nadir Majhi* closes with communal struggle refracted through Kuber's personal transgression, while *The Outsider* affirms an individual's solitary recognition of mortality as the ground of authenticity. Thus, while Bandopadhyay grounds existential secularism in collective struggle and ethical ambiguity, Camus frames it in the solitary lucidity of confronting death, revealing the cultural elasticity of existential thought.

Conclusion

In the convergence of *Padma Nadir Majhi* and *The Outsider*, the texts present a compelling study of existential inquiry and secular critique that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. Through the lens of Manik Bandyopadhyay's Bengal and Albert Camus' post-war France, both texts show how human beings confront mortality, freedom, and authenticity when faced with poverty, oppression, or the indifference of the universe. Bandyopadhyay captures this through Kuber and Hossain Miya, whose lives reveal the harsh realities of scarcity and unequal power, while Camus presents Meursault, whose indifference to social norms embodies an unflinching awareness of absurdity. Despite their cultural differences, the two novels converge in their critique of social constructs and their insistence on authenticity over conformity. Examined in relation to each other, the works demonstrate that existential struggles are universal but expressed differently across contexts, and they encourage readers to reflect on life's fragility and the search for meaning in a world without transcendence.

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