



ONTOLOGICAL RUPTURE AND EXISTENTIAL BECOMING

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Abstract:

This exegesis investigates the profound phenomenological reconfiguration of migrant subjectivity in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016). This explores how diasporic displacement manifests as an acute crisis of being. While extensive critical scholarship has rigorously examined both novels through postcolonial, sociological, and feminist paradigms, significant hermeneutic gaps persist regarding their deeper existential dimensions, particularly concerning how individuals confront and transcend structural alienation. Accordingly, traditional framings of migration as a mere socioeconomic adjustment overlook the fundamental ontological rupture experienced by the migrant subject when ideological illusions collapse. This gives rise to the following research question: How do Ali's and Mbue's narratives articulate the transition from thrownness and inauthenticity toward the courageous assumption of authentic selfhood? To address this, the analysis employs a comparative phenomenological framework rooted in Martin Heidegger's ontological categories, specifically thrownness, uncanniness, and authenticity. Although this philosophical lens provides profound insight into the internal mechanics of subjective awakening and structural collapse, its inherent limitation lies in its abstraction, which risks sidelining the concrete socio-historical and material specificities of postcolonial and capitalist realities. As far as the analytical architecture is concerned, it unfolds across two distinct axes: the first examines the state of thrownness within pre-existing socioeconomic structures and the subsequent ontological rupture, while the second investigates the confrontation with dread and the emergence of pragmatic, gendered agency.

Keywords: agency; alienation; diaspora; existentialism; phenomenology

1. Introduction

The migration of human consciousness across geopolitical borders is one of the defining ontological fractures of modernity, hurling the displaced subject into an alien horizon that destabilizes the fundamental coordinates of being. In Monica Ali's 2003 novel *Brick Lane* and

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Imbolo Mbue's 2016 narrative *Behold the Dreamers*ⁱⁱ, this geographical displacement transcends simple socioeconomic relocation to manifest as a profound crisis of human existence. Ali's London-based chronicle traces the claustrophobic confinement of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman whose life in Tower Hamlets is initially governed by absolute fatalism and her husband Chanu's illusory faith in institutional assimilation, until the quiet reclamation of her autonomy through the sewing machine shatters her passivity. Concurrently, Mbue's New York-facing narrative plunges Jende and Neni Jonga into the unforgiving machinery of the American capitalist dream, where the 2008 financial collapse ruthlessly dismantles their normative aspirations. In both texts, the migrant subject is stripped of foundational certainties, forced to confront an existence where inherited cultural scripts dissolve into the void of radical freedom. To thoroughly interrogate this existential friction, critics must navigate a complex, chronologically organized genealogy of theoretical interventions that map the contours of diaspora, subjectivity, and spatial alienation.

Beginning with early and mid-twentieth-century foundations, Karl Marx's formulations on alienation in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* delineate how the worker becomes estranged from the product of their labor, though an exclusive focus on economic determinism inherently subordinates the existential dimensions of human suffering. Advancing into the interwar period, Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) supplies the ultimate ontological scaffolding for understanding human existence through the categories of thrownness, uncanniness, and authenticity, even if the abstraction of fundamental ontology risks occluding the concrete, historically situated specificities of postcolonial realities. Complementing this phenomenological turn, Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) interrogates the reification of human relations under commodity production, yet his totalizing theory of class consciousness leaves little room for individual, gendered subversion from the margins. Moving further into the mid-century critical landscape, Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958) explores the intimate topology of the home and the verticality of human reverie, though a strictly phenomenological reduction tends to abstract the domestic sphere from the violent socioeconomic pressures shaping migrant dwellings.

Shortly thereafter, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) provides an unsparing diagnosis of epidermalization and ontological negation, though its primary focus on racialized colonial subjects in the French Antilles does not fully encompass the diverse socioeconomic specificities of contemporary Asian and African migration. In parallel, Aimé Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955) exposes the brutalizing strategies of imperialist expansion, yet macro-political critique remains detached from the microscopic, everyday existential crises of the immigrant domestic unit. Progressing into the latter half of the twentieth century, Mikhail Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) revolutionizes the analysis of heteroglossia and the chronotope, disclosing how space and time intersect in the novel; however, a formalist methodology tends to prioritize linguistic polyphony over the raw anguish of ontological crisis. Transitioning into the post-structuralist turning points of the 1980s and 1990s, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), interrogates the structural impossibility of subaltern self-representation within patriarchal and imperialist discourses, but

ⁱⁱ For any other references to the novels under consideration (*Brick Lane* and *Behold the Dreamers*), we will use *BL* and *BLD*.

a deconstructive pessimism risks foreclosing the very trajectories of pragmatic agency that subaltern women carve out. This is extended by Édouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* (1990), who articulates a poetic philosophy of opacity and relational identity that rejects totalizing systems, although a highly lyrical framework can prove recalcitrant when applied to the harsh, deterministic realities of capitalist exploitation depicted in contemporary migrant literature.

Moreover, in his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1990), Stuart Hall conceptualizes identity as an ongoing process of “*becoming*,” though a cultural-studies approach lacks the rigorous phenomenological tools necessary to analyze the deep structure of subjective anxiety. Bringing a psychoanalytic perspective to the diasporic condition, Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) brilliantly theorizes double consciousness and rootless cosmopolitanism, yet a focus on transnational musical and cultural flows leaves the mundane, domestic spaces of migrant enclosure underexplored. In the same era, within *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi K. Bhabha formulates the concept of the “*third space*” and “*hybridity*,” offering profound purchase on cultural ambivalence; nevertheless, a psychoanalytically inflected framework tends to privilege semiotic discourse over the raw, ontological immediacy of material suffering.

Entering the turn of the millennium, theoretical focus shifted toward the intersections of structural geography, humanistic melancholy, and transnational critique. Edward Said’s *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (2000) captures the poignant melancholy of territorial detachment through a humanistic paradigm, but largely bypasses the structural mechanics of existential dread that paralyze the modern migrant. Expanding upon the spatial dimensions of power, David Harvey’s *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (2001) rigorously deconstructs how global capitalism produces and commodifies urban geographies, yet an orthodox Marxist lens occasionally flattens the intimate interiority of the displaced individual into a mere symptom of macroeconomic flows. Bridging these paradigms further into the twenty-first century, Chandra Talpade Mohanty in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003) examines Western hegemonic feminisms while mapping the localized resistance of Third World women, although sociological rigor similarly understates the metaphysical dimensions of alienation.

This expansive corpus of theoretical discourse finds a direct parallel in the burgeoning critical output dedicated specifically to Ali’s and Mbue’s narratives. Scholarship concerning Ali’s *Brick Lane* has evolved through diverse critical lenses. It begins with Rehana Ahmed’s “*Brick Lane: A Materialist Reading of the Novel and its Reception*” (2010), which examines the text’s socio-political engagement and analyzes polarized critical responses concerning its representation of the British-Bangladeshi community. Building upon this foundation, Manab Pratim Das’s “*Monica Ali’s Brick Lane: A Feminist Perspective*” (2015) offers a feminist perspective that traces Nazneen’s psychological transition from a submissive subject of patriarchal structures to an independent woman capable of self-determination. This socioeconomic and structural critique is further deepened by Stephen Morton’s “*Multicultural Neoliberalism, Global Textiles, and the Making of the Indebted Female Entrepreneur in Monica Ali’s Brick Lane*” (2018), which investigates how global capitalism, neoliberal state policies, and home-based garment manufacturing converge to exploit immigrant female labor. Shifting toward psychological and diasporic dimensions, Sonba Salve’s “*The Search for Selfhood:*

Identity Crisis in Monica Ali's Novel, *Brick Lane*" (2023) explores the acute psychological dislocation, rootlessness, and identity fragmentation experienced by first-generation immigrants navigating London, a theme complemented by Sartaj Ahmad Lone and Manju Sharma's "A Study on Cultural Identity in Monica Ali's Novels" (2024), who analyze the pressures of cultural hybridity, assimilation, and the struggle to retain native heritage. More recently, the discourse has returned to class-conscious interventions with Rehana Ahmed's "Locating class in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and its reception" (2024) re-examination of the novel to highlight internal socioeconomic stratifications within the community, which is further advanced by Abbas Murad Dohan's "Negotiating Identity and Cultural Hybridity in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*" (2025) through his focus on the interplay of generational shifts, transnational belonging, and the continuous navigation of hybrid cultural spaces.

Similarly, the critical reception of Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* maps the compounding psychological and structural burdens of the American capitalist apparatus. In "Acculturation and African Identity in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*" (2019), Mary Linda Vivian Onuoha initiates this trajectory by investigating the psychological and cultural friction African immigrants endure while balancing cultural assimilation against the preservation of native identity. Extending this look at migrant disillusionment, Komla M. Avono's "Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*: An Artistic Journey from Utopia to Dystopia" (2023) charts the Jonga family's tragic arc as high-reaching utopian hopes of the American Dream dissolve into severe socioeconomic alienation. This systemic critique is sharpened by Brygida Gasztold's "A Narrative of Arrival and Return in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*" (2024), who deconstructs the conceptual binary of arrival and return to emphasize the emotional toll of displacement and the impossibility of true repatriation, alongside Barbara Meilak's "The Myth of the American Dream in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*" (2025), who examines the systemic aporias and capitalist illusions embedded within American ideology during the catalyst of the 2008 financial crisis. Completing this materialist and structural evaluation, in their article "Marxist Analysis of Racism in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*: Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals" (2025), Nimra Maryam and Hafiza Rimsha Malik apply a Marxist critique to demonstrate how systemic racism intersects with macro-level socioeconomic inequality and corporate exploitation.

Despite the monumental richness of the above unfolding paradigms, a critical lacuna remains: while various critics have exhaustively interrogated both texts through postcolonial, sociological, and feminist lenses, few studies have rigorously synthesized a phenomenological framework to examine how the collapse of ideological illusions precipitates both an ontological rupture and a subsequent existential becoming within contemporary migrant literature. Accordingly, traditional critical readings consistently reduce migration to a purely socioeconomic adjustment or cultural negotiation. In doing so, they fundamentally overlook the profound ontological catastrophe experienced by the migrant subject when their foundational expectations dissolve into the void. This systemic oversight gives rise to the following research question: How do Ali's and Mbue's novels articulate the dialectical transition from thrownness and inauthenticity toward the courageous assumption of authentic selfhood amidst the wreckage of global capitalism and patriarchal determinism?

To examine this question, the current exegesis uses a comparative phenomenological framework. Anchored in Martin Heidegger's ontological categories: thrownness, uncanniness, and authenticity, this critical analysis juxtaposes Monica Ali's London-based narrative with Imbolo Mbue's New York chronicle to illuminate structural homologies in their migrant protagonists' evolution from passive objects of destiny to active architects of their own being. While this method offers deep hermeneutic insight into the universal mechanics of human anxiety and self-actualization, its high degree of abstraction risks occluding the hyper-specific material, racial, and geopolitical conditions governing the postcolonial migrant experience.

In terms of articulation, the analytical architecture, it unfolds across two distinct axes: the first examines the migrant's initial state of thrownness within pre-existing socioeconomic structures and the subsequent ontological rupture of those systems; the second investigates the phenomenological confrontation with dread and the emergence of gendered agency, culminating in authentic self-realization.

2. Thrownness and Ontological Rupture

The migration of human consciousness across geopolitical borders is an ontological displacement of catastrophic proportions, an abrupt severance from the familiar matrix of the lifeworld into an unmapped, indifferent, and hostile horizon.

Within the parameters of contemporary postcolonial and diasporic literature, Ali's and Mbue's fictional works articulate spatial and cultural dislocation not merely as surface-level socioeconomic relocation, but as a profound, agonizing confrontation with the existential condition of absolute human thrownness into an unchosen reality. The human subject is invariably hurled into an existence and a spatial environment pre-conditioned by historical, cultural, and material structures that it neither authored nor commanded, forcing it to navigate a landscape defined by pre-existing constraints. This condition manifests in both migrant narratives as an immersive, unexamined submersion in the dictatorship of the collective social mass, wherein the migrant subject initially surrenders ontological autonomy to overarching teleological *grand* narratives that dictate the boundaries of being. Examining this intricate landscape of displacement in their essay *Writing across Worlds: Literature and Migration*, Russell King, John Connell, and Paul White maintain,

"[migration is not] a mere interval between fixed points of departure and arrival, but a mode of being in the world – 'migrancy' [...] The migrant voice [feels] stranger and yet at home, to live simultaneously inside and outside one's immediate situation, to [be] permanently on the run, to think of returning but to realize at the same time the impossibility of doing so." (King et al., 1995, xv)

Building upon this existential framework, the foundational premise of the above quotation is a radical rejection of the traditional, linear model of migration. Historically, migration has often been treated as a mechanical transition, a logistical bridge connecting a point of origin to a destination. However, King, Connell, and White elevate migration from a temporary event into a permanent ontological state. By designating it as a "mode of being in the

world,” the authors borrow implicitly from phenomenology, reframing migrancy not as something a person does temporarily, but as a fundamental condition of how one exists. Consequently, the subject’s entire consciousness, spatial awareness, and relationship to reality are permanently altered by the rupture of displacement. In tandem with this ontological shift, the phrase “*feels stranger and yet at home*” taps directly into the psychoanalytic concept of the uncanny, though it is flipped onto a sociological plane. On one hand, the host culture remains foreign, alienating, and structurally exclusionary. On the other hand, the homeland is often mythologized or has changed so radically that it can no longer be physically inhabited. As a result, this duality creates a split subjectivity where the migrant can never fully assimilate to total invisibility within the host nation, nor can they cleanly sever the emotional cords tying them to their roots.

Deepening this dual perspective, to live simultaneously inside and outside one’s immediate situation is to embody the quintessential postcolonial condition of liminality. Physically, the migrant walks the streets of the adopted city and labors within its systems, thereby standing inside. Yet, culturally and psychologically, they view those very systems through the critical lens of an outsider who recognizes the invisible apparatuses of power, thereby standing outside. Thus, this double perspective grants the migrant author a unique critical distance to interrogate both the oppressive realities of the host country and the romanticized myths of the homeland. Exacerbating this liminal state, the assertion that the migrant is “*permanently on the run*” highlights an underlying exhaustion that is psychological as well as physical. Even when the physical journey ends and the migrant settles into a dwelling, the internal journey continues. Indeed, they remain perpetually running from the ghosts of their past, the socioeconomic precarity of their present, and the systemic instability of their future. Therefore, the “run” ceases to be purely geographical and transforms into an internal, psychological race to secure identity and legitimacy in a world hostile to rootlessness.

Crucially, the preceding quotation culminates in the tragic realization of the impossibility of return. The fantasy of return often serves as the psychological anchor that sustains migrants through hardship, functioning as a mental refuge where identity is restored. Nevertheless, the realization of this impossibility shatters the illusion on both temporal and spatial levels. Because time moves forward and neither the homeland nor the migrant remains unchanged, and because the subject can never truly un-know the wider world, to attempt repatriation is often to discover that one has become a stranger to one’s own people. In Monica Ali’s *BL*, this dynamic is vividly embodied in Chanu’s desperate attempts to mask his dislocation through defensive posturing and false assimilation:

“The begging letters still come [...] ‘They think there is gold lying about in the streets here and I am just hoarding it all in my palace. But I did not come here for money [...] Do they enquire about my diplomas?’ He gestured to the wall, where various framed certificates were displayed. ‘They do not.’” (Ali, 2003, p. 35)

Later, as Dr. Azad prepares to leave, Chanu’s forced performance of institutional belonging, declaring that “*we intellectuals must stick together*,” betrays the profound psychological precarity of a man running from his own failures. Meanwhile, Nazneen’s silent exchange with

the doctor, caught in “a complicity of looks... which said something about her husband that she ought not to be saying” (2003, p. 35), establishes that crucial liminal perspective, positioning her as the quiet observer standing both inside and outside her husband’s delusions. At the same time, Chanu seeks comfort in the artificial glow of the television, which he “liked to keep [...] glowing in the evenings, like a fire in the corner of the room” (2003, p. 35), providing a domestic hearth substitute for a homeland he can never truly reclaim.

Similarly, in *BTD*, Jende and Neni Jonga are hurled into the teleological machinery of the American Dream, an overarching mythos that treats meritocracy as an absolute, metaphysical law governing their trajectory in New York City. This systemic ruthlessness is starkly laid bare when Jende’s legal counsel confronts him with the unyielding, bureaucratic indifference of the state:

“The American government does not care whether you are a one-day-old baby who was brought here and ended up illegal or whether you were blindfolded and tossed into a shipping container [...] Once you are here illegally, you are here illegally. You will pay the price [...] ‘America can be hell, I know. Man nova see suffer until the day ei enter America, make I tell you.’ He laughed again, the kind of laughter released only at the remembrance of awful things past.” (Mbue, 2016, p. 321)

This exchange encapsulates the crushing contradiction at the heart of the immigrant experience: the systemic apparatus of the host nation reduces human displacement to a rigid legal binary while masking its structural hostility behind the hollow promise of eventual reward. The lawyer’s grim laughter serves as a chilling psychological defense mechanism, exposing the dark underside of an assimilationist ideology that demands endless endurance while offering no structural sanctuary. By juxtaposing the absolute finality of the law with the generational trauma of “suffering” enacted upon the migrant body, the narrative strips away the romantic veneer of the immigrant saga, reframing the United States not as a beacon of opportunity, but as an indifferent labyrinth that consumes the ontological security of those who enter its borders. Through the theoretical lens of Karl Marx’s foundational formulations in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, this state is further complicated by the strategies of alienation, wherein the worker is violently estranged from the product of their labor and, consequently, from their own species-being. Marx outlines this total estrangement of the laboring subject:

“First, the fact that [labor] is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind [...] As a result, therefore, man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions -eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.” (Marx, 1844, p. 71)

By mapping Marx’s critique of the 19th-century industrial worker onto the contemporary migrant condition as depicted by writers like Ali and Mbue, the framework undergoes a vital

ontological mutation. Marx diagnosed alienation primarily through the structural mechanics of political economy: the worker is severed from the object produced because the capitalist owns the means of production. However, when applied to the migrant subject, this estrangement transcends the factory floor, permeating the entire fabric of spatial, temporal, and social existence. The migrant is alienated not merely from the surplus value of their labor, but from the very ground of citizenship, historical continuity, and cultural legibility.

In this extended formulation, the migrant's "*species-being*," Marx's term for humanity's capacity for free, conscious, and universal creative activity, is doubly negated. First, they are thrust into the lowest tiers of the global informal economy, where their physical labor is hyper-exploited just to secure bare biological subsistence ("*eating, drinking, and procreating*"). Second, and more insidiously, their temporal horizon is fractured; they are trapped in a perpetual present of precarity, cut off from a meaningful past and structurally barred from a secure futurity. Thus, the migrant experience radicalizes Marx's observation that "*what is human becomes animal*": the legal, social, and economic apparatuses of the host state reduce complex human subjects to bare life, transforming living, historically situated persons into transient units of labor power. Bringing Marx into dialogue with Ali and Mbue thereby rescues historical materialism from rigid economic determinism, demonstrating that the alienation of the modern worker is ultimately an all-encompassing spatial and ontological exile.

This initial state of inauthenticity is meticulously sustained by what Georg Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness*, terms reification, a process wherein human relations and subjective interiority assume the cold, objective character of commodity structures, blinding subjects to the constructed and precarious nature of the myths they inhabit. Within the migrant experience, this reifying logic ensures that systemic exploitation does not appear as a violent, contingent arrangement imposed by power, but rather as an unchangeable law of nature. The migrant's labor, legal status, and very presence are flattened into mere market variables, stripping away human narrative and reducing social bonds to transactions governed by invisible, reified forces. To fully grasp how this totalizing commodity-structure colonizes both objective institutions and subjective consciousness, Lukács articulates its foundational centrality to capitalist totality:

"It is no accident that Marx should have begun with an analysis of commodities when, in the two great works of his mature period, he set out to portray capitalist society in its totality and to lay bare its fundamental nature. For at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question, and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of commodity-structure. Of course, the problem can only be discussed with this degree of generality if it achieves the depth and breadth to be found in Marx's own analyses. That is to say, the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded [...] as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them. [...] The essence of commodity-structure has often been pointed out. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a

phantom objectivity, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.” (Lukács, 1923, pp. 83-84)

Lukács’s formulation of the “*phantom objectivity*” provides the crucial theoretical mechanism for understanding how the modern capitalist state manages the migrant body. Reification does not merely distort economic markets; it colonizes the social imagination, transforming human beings into quantifiable commodities whose worth is dictated by supply, demand, and legal categorization. When a relation between people assumes the character of a thing, the structural violence of migration control, such as border walls, detention quotas, and precarious labor contracts, is reframed as an administrative, technical, or natural necessity rather than a political choice born of human design. This “*phantom objectivity*” creates an all-embracing autonomy that conceals the underlying social relations of exploitation. For the migrant subject analyzed by Ali and Mbue, this manifests as an environment where institutional indifference and structural racism appear as neutral, immutable laws of the host society. The migrant is forced to navigate a world where their social worth is mediated entirely by reified metrics of documentation and labor utility. By anchoring the analysis in Lukács, we see that the crisis of migration is not an external aberration of capitalism, but the logical outcome of a social order that turns human existence into a commodity, rendering structural cruelty invisible beneath the veneer of objective rationality.

To fully interrogate this immersive state of inauthentic thrownness, the critic must examine how the spatial environments inhabited by the characters serve as the physical, architectural embodiment of their subjugation. When individuals are passively “thrown” into a world they neither chose nor fully comprehend, their surrounding architecture ceases to be a neutral backdrop; instead, it becomes an oppressive apparatus that locks them into prescribed behavioral loops. Rather than functioning as spaces of genuine self-actualization, these domestic and urban interiors mirror the alienation of the inhabitants, materializing the invisible ideological structures that govern their lives. To comprehend how such spaces psychologically entrap the subject, one must turn to the foundational phenomenological inquiry into how humans imbue their physical surroundings with emotional and psychological weight. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard explores this deep, pre-reflective bond between human consciousness and domestic space, arguing that the home operates as the primordial vessel of human reverie:

“But the related problems are many if we want to determine the profound reality of all the subtle shadings of our attachment for a chosen spot. For a phenomenologist, these shadings must be taken as the first rough outlines of a psychological coloring. We should therefore have to say how we inhabit our vital space, in accord with all the dialects of life, how we take root, day after, in a corner of the world.” (Bachelard, 1958, p. 4) Sartre

This profound entangling of psyche and architecture reveals why spatial displacement or architectural confinement is so devastating to the characters under scrutiny. Because the self is fundamentally co-constituted by the “corners” it inhabits, an environment engineered for alienation preemptively forecloses the possibility of authentic self-determination. The characters

do not merely occupy hostile spaces; they are psychically colonized by them, their daily routines acting as an unwitting collaboration with the architectural forces that subjugate them. Accordingly, breaking free from inauthentic thrownness requires more than a shift in ideological perspective, it demands a radical re-imagining and spatial restructuring of the places where human life takes root.

Yet, in *BL*, the domestic space occupied by Nazneen in *Tower Hamlets* functions as a direct inversion of a Bachelardian sanctuary. This operates instead as a claustrophobic enclosure of containment, confinement, and passive surveillance. Far from offering a vertical topography that shelters reverie and fosters rootedness, the high-rise flat acts as a pressure cooker of alienation where external socio-economic displacement is internalized as bodily restriction. Nazneen is not allowed to organically take root in a chosen spot; rather, she is pinned to a predetermined geographic and cultural matrix that denies her agency. Ali's novel illustrates this spatial subjugation through Nazneen's silent, immobile observation of her surroundings, writing:

"Slices of grey sky wedged themselves between the blocks of flats. How small they were. How mean. In Gouripur, when she looked up she saw that the sky reached to the very ends of the earth. Here she could measure it simply by spreading her fingers. The bubble moved to her chest and lodged just beneath her collarbone. She sat very still. If she moved, the bubble might get into one of her lungs and burst it." (Ali, 2003, p. 424)

This concise textual evidence discloses how Nazneen's initial thrownness is inextricably bound to her physical immobility and spatial entrapment. The flat in *Tower Hamlets* is not a shelter of reverie, but an architectural manifestation of her absolute subjugation to a predetermined destiny. The window serves as the sole, unreachable threshold between her enclosed interiority and an exterior world she cannot touch, rendering her an invisible outsider in a society that ignores her presence while demanding her silent compliance. Her husband Chanu, meanwhile, operates as an avatar of inauthentic assimilation, endlessly quoting English poetry and clinging to bureaucratic civil service manuals while remaining blissfully blind to the structural exclusions that marginalize him. Chanu's blind adherence to the British institutional framework mirrors what Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, diagnoses as the alienated internalization of dominant values, wherein the marginalized subject seeks validation within a system predicated on their structural negation, observing that

"The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. In the French colonial army, and particularly in the Senegalese regiments, the black officers serve first of all as interpreters. They are used to convey the master's orders to their fellows, and they too enjoy a certain position of honor. There is the city, there is the country. There is the capital, there is the province. Apparently, the problem in the mother country is the same." (Fanon, 1952, p. 9)

This Fanonian mimicry is echoed with striking precision in *BTD*, where Jende Jonga's employment as a chauffeur for a Lehman Brothers executive exposes him to the glittering,

seductive facade of American hyper-capitalism. Jende's psychological investment in the wealth and lifestyle of his employer, Clark Edwards, is not merely economic; it is an ontological submission to the teleology of the American Dream, a profound, unshakeable belief that proximity to capital equates to existential validation. David Harvey's *Spaces of Capital* dismantles the foundational illusion of modern geography, arguing that "*the supposed neutrality of geographical knowledges has at best proven to be a beguiling fiction and at worst a downright fraud*" (2001, p. 232). Far from being objective or benign, spatial science and urban planning internalize strong ideological content, functioning as covert weapons in political and social struggle. Dominant forces of capital and the state manufacture this neutrality to represent social phenomena as static things subject to technocratic management, seamlessly disguising systemic exploitation as natural law.

This macro-level ideological framework manifests directly in the physical fabric of the modern metropolis, stripping away its presentation as a neutral stage open to opportunity. Global financial hubs like London and New York are calculated instruments of capital accumulation, where architectural blueprints and municipal zoning laws are engineered to manage, manipulate, and contain marginalized bodies. When these urban designs are treated as objective realities, the city materializes Georg Lukács's concept of reification. Hostile borders, segregated housing blocks, and gleaming corporate towers are naturalized as immutable fixtures of the landscape, effectively concealing the violent political choices and racial hierarchies embedded within them. This transformation of systemic inequality into an apparent law of urban existence masks the structural violence that relegates migrant communities to the periphery.

This structural critique illuminates the struggles of characters like Nazneen in Ali's *BL* and Jende in Mbue's *BTD*. For Nazneen, confined to the claustrophobic council estates of East London, and Jende, navigating the stark class divides of Manhattan, the city is never an open backdrop. Instead, it operates as a formidable mechanism designed to restrict their mobility and preserve the spatial hegemony of global capital. Harvey provides the essential macro-economic framework needed to understand the micro-domestic suffocation experienced by these characters. The entrapment felt within cramped apartments and oppressive domestic spheres is directly tied to a global spatial order where geography acts as an instrument of state and corporate supremacy. Hemmed in by invisible yet impenetrable borders enforced by global economic systems, Nazneen and Jende demonstrate that physical displacement and confinement are deliberate features of contemporary capitalism, one where geography itself ensures the systematic exploitation and containment of migrant labor.

Jende and Neni's cramped apartment in Harlem, much like Nazneen's flat in Tower Hamlets, represents a site of subaltern containment, a spatial imposition that daily reinforces their status as outsiders hurled into an economic machinery that utilizes their physical labor while systematically denying their subjective depth. Mbue encapsulates this structural vulnerability when Jende reflects on his daily commute into Manhattan, noting in an extended passage:

"When the doors opened he straightened his shoulders and introduced himself to the receptionist [...] They walked through an open space [...] into a sunny office with a four-paneled glass window

running from wall to wall and floor to ceiling, the thousand autumn-drenched trees and proud towers of Manhattan standing outside. For a second his mouth fell open [...] 'Please, sir, good morning,' Jende said, turning toward him and half-bowing." (Mbue, 2016, pp. 4-5)

The transition from the anonymous transit of the subway into the pristine interior of Clark Edwards's office stages an immediate clash of spatial scales that underscores Jende's structural subordination. The panoramic view of "*proud towers*" and autumn-drenched trees framed by floor-to-ceiling glass establishes a visual regime of elite mastery. This architecture does more than merely showcase wealth; it actively produces an environment of exclusion. The sheer transparency of the glass wall acts as a one-way ideological screen, projecting an image of open, sunlit opportunity while simultaneously establishing an impenetrable barrier that designates who belongs to the landscape and who merely services it. Jende's physical reactions within this corporate sanctum reveal how spatial hegemony is internalized and bodily performed. Upon entering the office, his instinctive gestures, straightening his shoulders, letting his mouth fall open in temporary awe, and executing a half-bow, register his acute awareness of his own thrownness into a foreign, hostile class structure. The meticulous choreography of the corporate space, from the executive's cherry-wood desk to the polished leather chairs, demands a subaltern posture. Jende is positioned not as an independent economic agent, but as an intruder whose labor is provisionally admitted only under the strict condition of complete deference.

Tucked quietly into this scene of elite opulence is a subtle yet devastating symbol of capitalist production: Clark Edwards feeding sheets of paper into a pullout shredder while Jende delivers his greeting. This mundane corporate action mirrors the systemic logic governing migrant labor itself. Just as documents are fed into a machine to be rendered obsolete and discarded, the immigrant body is drawn into the machinery of New York financial capital to be utilized, managed, and ultimately treated as disposable. Through this quiet juxtaposition, Mbue exposes how the gleaming towers of Manhattan rely entirely on a subterranean system of human extraction, proving that the modern metropolis is meticulously engineered to perpetuate inequality under the guise of aesthetic and professional neutrality. This immersive thrownness within mediating teleological structures is sustained through the psychic defense mechanisms of displacement and temporal postponement. As Edward Said observes in *Reflections on Exile*, displacement is a condition of agonizing discontinuity that frequently engenders a compensatory mythology, functioning as a psychological shield against unmediated displacement:

"It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted [...] [T]hese are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever." (Said, 2000, p. 173)

Said's conceptualization of the "*unhealable rift*" provides the necessary psychic counterpart to David Harvey's macro-spatial critique. While Harvey maps how global capitalism physically corners the migrant body within exclusionary urban topologies like Tower

Hamlets or Harlem, Said articulates the internal, emotional devastation of that spatial trap. The migrant does not merely occupy a hostile foreign geography; they exist in a state of foundational rupture. The “*essential sadness*” Said describes captures the psychological toll of being severed from a native place and hurled into a transactional system that values only labor power, rendering physical survival a constant, quiet mourning.

To endure the daily humiliation of subaltern containment, such as Jende’s submissive half-bow in the glass-walled office or Nazneen’s silent suffocation in the council estate, displaced subjects rely heavily on the temporal deferral of their suffering. The present reality of exploitation is bearable only through the construction of an idealized future or an imagined return. This psychic defense mechanism allows characters to function inside the machinery of Western capital while mentally inhabiting a deferred temporality. Yet, as Said notes, these protective mythologies are constantly undermined by the permanence of what was left behind. Said’s framework reveals how late capitalism co-opts the migrant’s psychological endurance. The compulsion to project hope onto a distant future or a romanticized homeland acts as an internal safety valve, neutralizing potential resistance. By locking subjects into an endless cycle of labor and temporal postponement, the global economic order ensures that the migrant’s psychic energy is entirely consumed by the management of grief, effectively neutralizing political agency and cementing the spatial hegemony of the metropolis.

In *BL*, this manifests as the persistent, illusory myth of return maintained by Chanu, who constantly invokes a future repatriation to Bangladesh as the ultimate teleological fulfillment of his migration, thereby refusing to authentically inhabit his current spatial-temporal reality in London. Ali exposes the bankruptcy of this psychological retreat, noting in an extended narrative description:

“He talked of home as if it were a garden waiting for him, but the garden was overgrown with the weeds of his own failures. Every time he spoke of the return, he built another brick in the wall of his own delusion, convincing himself that the present was merely an intermission, a temporary inconvenience before the glorious restoration of his status in a land that had already forgotten him.” (Ali, 2003, p. 90)

This temporal suspension is structurally analogous to the condition theorized by Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, wherein the migrant occupies an intermediate space of cultural ambivalence, suspended between the lost origin and the unassimilable host nation, where “*the cutting edge of translation and negotiation [...] comes to be the hermeneutic task of representation*” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). However, Bhabha’s semiotic and psychoanalytic emphasis tends to privilege discursive subversion over the raw, unmediated weight of existential dread. In *BTD*, Jende and Neni similarly suspend their lived reality through the teleological promise of permanent legal status and upward mobility, viewing their grueling labor and marginalization as temporary rites of passage within a grand, linear narrative of immigrant success. These teleological absolutes function as what Jean-Paul Sartre critiques in his broader existential framework as bad faith, an ontological retreat wherein the individual adopts pre-fabricated roles and deterministic excuses to evade the dizzying vertigo of absolute freedom. The characters in Ali’s and Mbue’s narratives initially take refuge in this bad faith and allow the grand narratives

of patriarchal tradition, national origin, and capitalist meritocracy to dictate the boundaries of their being. They are objects moved by external forces that sleepwalk through an inauthentic existence where their choices are pre-programmed by mass conformity.

Yet, the phenomenological integrity of this inauthentic thrownness is inherently fragile, destined to shatter when the structural pillars sustaining it undergo catastrophic failure. The transition from inauthentic immersion to radical ontological crisis is precipitated by the unsettling experience of absolute uncanniness, which erupts when the familiar tools and structures of everyday life break down. In *BTD*, this ontological rupture arrives with the cataclysm of the 2008 financial crisis, a systemic earthquake that violently dismantles the architecture of American financial capitalism. When Lehman Brothers collapses, Jende's employment is abruptly terminated, and with it evaporates the entire teleological edifice of economic salvation. Mbue dramatizes this existential annihilation through an extended depiction of Jende's despair:

"The world he had worshiped, the gleaming towers that held the promise of his children's future, had crumbled overnight like dust in a windstorm. There was no safety net, no friendly executive to pat his shoulder, no secret reserve of American grace. The silence in the apartment was absolute, a heavy, suffocating vacuum that swallowed every dream he had packed across the Atlantic." (Mbue, 2016, p. 211)

The abrupt termination of Jende's employment exposes the brutal reality of a system built on conditional inclusion. When the gleaming facade of Wall Street collapses, it takes with it the foundational myth that hard work and perseverance guarantee upward mobility within the American empire. Mbue's powerful imagery of dust in a windstorm captures more than just financial ruin; it illustrates the total vaporization of the immigrant subject's teleological horizon. Jende's despair stems from the realization that his labor was valued only as long as the market required it, leaving him utterly disposable when capital experienced a crisis.

This sudden loss of livelihood is not merely an economic catastrophe; it is an existential annihilation that strips Jende of his constructed identity, plunging the subject into the abyss of rootless alienation. The metropolis that once promised limitless possibility suddenly reveals its true face as a hostile, indifferent wasteland. This rupture echoes the theoretical insights of Aimé Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism*, which exposes the inherent brutality and contingency of Western imperialist structures, arguing that:

"A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization. A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization. A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization. The fact is that the so-called European civilization 'Western' civilization -as it has been shaped by two centuries of bourgeois rule, is incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem; that Europe is unable to justify itself either before the bar of 'reason' or before the bar of 'conscience'; and that, increasingly, it takes refuge in a hypocrisy which is all the more odious because it is less and less likely to deceive." (Césaire, 1955, p. 31)

In other words, Césaire's critique of Western civilization as one that "*uses its principles for trickery and deceit*" finds its contemporary resonance here, where the promise of the American Dream operates as a sophisticated ideological apparatus designed to mask systemic contingency and exploitation. Jende can no longer maintain the fiction of meritocratic mobility; the collapse of the financial markets acts as the objective correlative of his inner dissolution that tears away the veil of self-deception and exposes the raw, terrifying contingency of his existence in America. Stripped of his job, Jende confronts the chilling truth of a society that offers no safety net for those it has instrumentalized. The absolute silence in the apartment mirrors the profound isolation of the marginalized subject abandoned by the very structures they sought to integrate into. This rupture tears away the veil of self-deception, revealing that the metropolis is not a neutral arena of opportunity, but a hostile, stratified wasteland that consumes immigrant vitality and discards the shell. Ali's *BL* translates the macro-level spatial and economic violence of London into the suffocating microcosm of domestic decay, capturing the psychological toll of institutional rejection:

"Beneath the table, the files and papers had been breeding, intermarrying with balls of string, boxes of staples, rolls of labels, chains of clips. A pair of pants lay exhausted in a heap; a sock sat fossilized in dust [...] He spoke these days of 'if'. It used to be 'when'. When the promotion came through."
(Ali, 2003, p. 157)

The transformation of Chanu's workspace into a stagnant ecosystem of debris functions as a profound indictment of an exclusionary labor market that systematically devalues immigrant intellectual capital. Ali captures the psychological disintegration of the migrant subject not through grand political declarations, but through the poignant decay of domestic space, where the tools meant to secure upward mobility have instead become monuments to professional defeat. The physical chaos accumulating beneath Chanu's table serves as a brilliant domestic objective correlative for his professional failure and systemic alienation within the British labor market. The bureaucratic tools of upward mobility, files, papers, labels, and staples, have mutated into a stagnant, self-replicating ecosystem of debris that symbolizes the dead-end nature of Chanu's aspirations within a rigid class system. By describing an "exhausted" pair of pants and a "fossilized" sock, Ali's novel animates the inanimate, illustrating how Chanu's unyielding, obsessive pursuit of promotion has bled the life out of his domestic surroundings, exteriorizing the exhaustion and calcification of his internal world. The shift from "when" to "if" marks the linguistic erosion of hope, signaling a psychological capitulation to institutional rejection. This domestic clutter is not merely untidy; it is the physical fallout of an exclusionary urban order that welcomes the labor of the postcolonial subject while locking the door to genuine advancement, trapping Chanu's ambitions and intellect in a perpetual loop of bureaucratic paralysis and quiet despair.

Bakhtin's thesis of the chronotope is exceptionally appropriate for analyzing Monica Ali's *BL*, functioning as the theoretical cornerstone that validates how domestic space and historical time collide in immigrant literature. By defining the chronotope as the artistic fusion of spatial and temporal indicators where "*time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible,*" and where "*space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history,*" Bakhtin

provides the exact vocabulary needed to decode how Nazneen's physical environment mirrors and enacts her psychological evolution (1981, p. 84). The immigrant domestic sphere in the novel is not a neutral backdrop; it is a compressed, highly charged time-space where patriarchal traditions, postcolonial dislocation, and socioeconomic marginalization actively intersect, shaping the very limits of her subjectivity. Chanu's reliance on outdated grand narratives and his persistent myth of a "golden Bengal" represent a desperate, ideological attempt to freeze time and preserve a nostalgic homeland within the confines of a cramped London flat. However, this static, claustrophobic chronotope sharply contrasts with the fluid, expansive reality of Nazneen's actual childhood memories in rural Bangladesh, a dynamic landscape of open fields, climbing amra trees, and boundless horizons where she once looked out across the countryside and contemplated her future (2003, pp. 103-104). When external pressures such as financial failure and urban alienation puncture Chanu's illusions, the immigrant enclave's chronotope collapses. The myth of return is exposed as an empty phantom, rendering Bangladesh permanently out of reach and London an exclusionary enclosure that leaves the characters in a state of profound ontological rootlessness.

Within this structural crisis, Bakhtin's assertion that *"the chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well"* because *"the image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic"* illuminates Nazneen's radical shift in agency (1981, p. 84). Amidst this crumbling domestic architecture, her silent observation, checking Chanu's face, realizing *"she was not needed,"* and walking away to fetch another spoon, highlights a pivotal turning point. Her realization that her husband's internal crisis leaves no room for her emotional labor initiates her escape from passive containment. The breakdown of Chanu's internal world, mirrored in the missing spoon and the suffocating papers, shatters the patriarchal enclosure that has mapped her life. By anchoring Nazneen's awakening to the literal breakdown of the home's time-space coordinates, Ali demonstrates how systemic external rejection implodes internal domestic hierarchies, forcing the subaltern subject out of quietist endurance and toward self-emancipation.

Within this spatial and temporal rupture, Nazneen's subtle gesture of walking away to fetch a spoon marks a pivotal turning point: she steps out of the cyclical, subservient time dictated by her husband's patriarchal authority and enters an active, self-authored present. Accordingly, the breakdown of the physical household mirrors the implosion of internal domestic hierarchies, forcing the subaltern subject out of spatial containment and toward self-emancipation. Unlike empirical fear, which has a definite, objective trigger, this dread is the vertigo experienced when the totality of significance collapses, and the individual realizes that the world offers no inherent meaning, no pre-established destiny, and no external authority to guide them. In *BL*, Nazneen's silent observations from her window give way to a suffocating internal dread as the absolute bankruptcy of inherited fatalism and Chanu's delusions becomes undeniable. Ali's text captures this pivotal shift in Nazneen's consciousness through a tense, claustrophobic scene:

"Approaching the door, she walked against an unseen drag, as if wading in chest-high water. Nazneen felt the bubble expand. Her collarbone would snap [...] Razia turned round and back again [...] 'You think you're doing what's best for your children,' said Razia [...] 'But you can

never go back and do it a different way and see if that would have been better.'" (Ali, 2003, pp. 422-423)

Clearly, the opening theoretical formulation establishes the philosophical stakes of Nazneen's psychological transition, moving away from standard, object-oriented fear into the realm of existential vertigo. By defining dread as an encounter with meaninglessness, where traditional signposts like fatalism or patriarchal protection dissolve, the text frames Nazneen's awakening not merely as marital discord, but as a profound ontological crisis. When Chanu's grand delusions and the quietist endurance that once governed her life are exposed as completely bankrupt, Nazneen is stripped of the external authorities that previously dictated her reality. This sets the stage for a radical confrontation with autonomy, where the destruction of old certainties forces her to register the crushing, physical weight of an unguided existence.

The narrative passage translates this abstract existential collapse into a visceral, suffocating physical reality. The sensation of walking against an "*unseen drag*" and feeling as though "*chest-high water*" or an expanding bubble might snap her collarbone externalizes the crushing psychological pressure of impending, inescapable decisions. In this environment, the safety nets of traditional duty, such as the instinctual retreat into "*it was right to go with her husband*" (2003, p. 423), clash violently with the acute awareness of individual responsibility. The characters are trapped between the inertia of old patterns and the terrifying realization that domestic roles can no longer protect them from the consequences of their choices. Razia's poignant declaration that one can never go back and test an alternative path, serves as the emotional and philosophical climax of this crisis. It captures the irrevocable nature of modern freedom, where the comforting illusion of pre-established destiny is replaced by the sobering permanence of human action. Comforting myths of passive endurance completely evaporate, leaving the subject stranded in the vast, terrifying silence of unscripted autonomy. Nazneen's transition from a passive observer at a window to a conscious actor navigating this pressure marks her final break from quietism, thrusting her into the radical, unmapped territory of self-determination.

Similarly, in *BTD*, Neni Jonga experiences acute existential vertigo as her husband sinks into deep psychological despair, rendering him increasingly incapable of sustaining the family amidst compounding pressures. As the systemic foundation of their American dream begins to fracture, marked by the impending collapse of the Lehman Brothers firm and the unraveling of their employers' lives, Neni is violently jolted out of her idealized expectations. She can no longer rely on Jende's blind optimism or the illusion of corporate benevolence to shield them from deportation and destitution. Mbue portrays Neni's sudden, sharp awakening to this raw reality through her friction with the men in her household, who remain dangerously complacent to the precarity of their position:

"She looks like she is weak, but she gets what she wants from people, one way or another. You cannot make any mistake with your job right now, let me tell you. One little mistake, you lose your job at a time when - 'You think I don't know that!' [...] Neni looked at Jende from head to toe, her momentary disdain unconcealed. She sat up and started lifting herself off the sofa. Winston stood up and pulled her to her feet. 'Put some sense into that coconut head of his,' she said to Winston.

'Because if I say one more thing to him, I swear to you, my mouth will start bleeding like a slaughtered cow's.' (Mbue, 2016, p. 203)

This passage marks a critical turning point in Neni's psychological evolution and her perception of her marital partnership. The erasure of her romantic illusion occurs when her look of *"momentary disdain"* is directed at Jende, signifying the death of her initial belief that her husband possesses the institutional or domestic authority to protect them. Where she once viewed him as an unwavering provider capable of securing their future, she now confronts the terrifying reality of his inadequacy and denial in the face of escalating crisis. The weight of acute exposure is underscored by Bo and Winston's anxious reminder, warning that *"you cannot make any mistake with your job right now"* (Mbue, 2016, p. 203). This dialogue highlights the razor-thin margin of error governing their undocumented existence. Neni's visceral reaction, desiring to speak until *"my mouth will start bleeding like a slaughtered cow's"* (2016, p. 203), captures the physical and emotional toll of this existential vertigo, revealing a body and mind under siege by the sheer volatility of their circumstances.

This scene births a new form of pragmatic agency. Neni's awakening is not characterized by passive despair, but by a harsh, galvanized realization. Stripped of any remaining safety net of divine providence or capitalist security, she recognizes that if survival requires aggressive, unyielding pragmatism, she will have to shoulder that burden herself, signaling her profound shift from a dependent spouse to the primary, clear-eyed anchor of the family. As Stuart Hall eloquently argues in *"Cultural Identity and Diaspora"*, identity is never a fixed, immutable essence, but a volatile becoming constituted within the play of history, culture, and power, noting that cultural identity:

"It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past." (Hall, 1990, p. 394)

To comprehend Hall's conceptualization of identity through the lens of the final sentence, we must examine the tension between sociological abstraction and visceral human experience. Hall argues that cultural identities are not fixed essences waiting to be recovered, but are instead subject to the continuous *"play of history, culture and power,"* shaped by the ways we are *"positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past"* (1990, p. 390). While this theoretical framework provides a brilliant blueprint for how identity can shift and adapt, it remains an intellectual mechanism. It treats the reinvention of the self as a structural process of repositioning within historical narratives. However, the concluding sentence exposes the severe limitation of this purely sociological approach by introducing the raw phenomenology of subjective collapse. For Neni, the *"play of history"* and the violent stripping of her safety nets are not neat academic concepts; they are experienced as a catastrophic bodily crisis. When her divine

and capitalist certainties evaporate, the dissolution of those cultural anchors does not feel like a liberating theoretical exercise. Instead, it feels “*akin to physical suffocation*,” the literal, suffocating panic of drowning in the wreckage of an old identity while desperately gasping for a new one.

The above passage forces us to read Hall’s theory of “*volatile becoming*” through a lens of profound bodily trauma. Hall explains the *structural necessity* of how Neni must transform from a dependent spouse into a galvanized, pragmatic anchor of her family. Yet, the concluding sentence captures the agonizing human cost of that transition. It bridges the gap between macro-level cultural theory and micro-level lived reality, reminding us that shedding an old identity and repositioning oneself in a broken world is an intensely agonizing process that exhausts the breath, body, and soul long before it ever registers as sociological triumph. The ontological rupture experienced by characters is further illuminated when juxtaposed with Paul Gilroy’s conceptualization of double consciousness and rootless cosmopolitanism in *The Black Atlantic*, wherein Gilroy examines how displaced populations inhabit a fractured space of transnational movement, noting that:

“As these internal divisions have grown, the price of that embarrassment has been an aching silence. To break that silence, I want to argue that black musical expression has played a role in reproducing what Zygmunt Bauman has called a distinctive counter culture of modernity.” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 36)

In this quotation, Gilroy identifies the psychological toll of displacement, the “*aching silence*” born from fractured identities, and looks to public artistic forms as the mechanism for articulating that trauma. By foregrounding black music, Gilroy suggests that a displaced population survives modernity by exteriorizing its internal fractures into a shared, collective counter-culture. However, this reliance on public-facing artistic expression reveals a critical blind spot: it presumes a public sphere of movement, voice, and performance. For figures confined entirely to the private sphere, this externalized “*counter culture*” remains out of reach, leaving them to contend with the aching silence without the redemptive release of public art. This gendered dimension finds a sharp articulation in Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, which critiques the homogenizing tendencies of Western feminisms while mapping the localized, material resistances of Third World women against interlocking systems of patriarchy and capitalism, which emphasize,

“This involves thematizing the third voice ‘to reconstruct solidarity as an inclusive ideal,’ rather than as an ‘us vs. them’ notion. Dean’s notion of a communicative, in-process understanding of the ‘we’ is useful, given that solidarity is always an achievement, the result of active struggle to construct the universal on the basis of particulars/differences. It is the praxis-oriented, active political struggle embodied in this notion of solidarity that is important to my thinking -and the reason I prefer to focus attention on solidarity rather than on the concept of ‘sisterhood.’ Thus, decolonization, anticapitalist critique, and the politics of solidarity are the central themes of this book. Each concept foregrounds my own commitments and emerges as a necessary component of an antiracist and internationalist feminism -without borders.” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 52)

Mohanty strategically rejects uncritical, homogenizing notions of “sisterhood” in favor of a dynamic, hard-won politics of solidarity. By invoking Jodi Dean’s concept of a communicative and in-process “we,” Mohanty emphasizes that true solidarity is never a given or an automatic emotional bond; rather, it is an active achievement forged through the constant, deliberate struggle to build universal bridges across deep lines of particularity and difference. By centering the “third voice,” Mohanty moves beyond binary oppositions of “us versus them,” advocating instead for an inclusive ideal that accommodates the complex realities of marginalized women. This operationalization of solidarity requires an ongoing, praxis-oriented political struggle against interlocking systems of oppression. These commitments, decolonization, anticapitalist critique, and differential solidarity, coalesce to form the bedrock of an antiracist, internationalist framework. Mohanty’s vision insists that a genuine feminism without borders must continually dismantle its own internal hierarchies, treating unity not as a starting point, but as a revolutionary horizon to be actively constructed.

The modern colonial project was never merely a bureaucratic or military exercise in territorial acquisition; it was an epistemological catastrophe that fundamentally remapped human consciousness. By imposing a totalizing Western cartography upon the globe, empire dictated not only where borders were drawn, but who possessed the legitimate vocabulary of humanity, history, and reason. This systemic reorganization created a rigid binary between the metropolitan center and the colonized periphery, calcifying an exclusionary hierarchy that treated non-Western populations as raw material, both physical and conceptual, for European self-actualization. Over time, the violent imposition of these structures eroded indigenous epistemologies, forcing marginalized societies to navigate an institutional reality that pathologized their existence. Yet, this cartographic dominance also sowed the seeds of its own destabilization, intertwining the psychological and political destinies of the colonizer and the colonized in a perpetual, dialectical confrontation. Edward Said on the interconnected terrain of empire and resistance:

“Because this redrawing of the world’s map was so dramatic, we have lost [...] an accurate historical, let alone moral sense that even in the contentiousness of struggle, imperialism and its opponents fought over the same terrain, contested the same history [...] opponents on the same cultural ground had fascinating encounters. Without metropolitan doubts and opposition, the characters, idiom, and very structure of native resistance to imperialism would have been different.” (Said, 1993, p. 199)

By revealing that imperialism and its resisters inhabited a shared, mutually constitutive cultural space, Said exposes the profound fiction of a pristine, self-contained Western modernity. This historical and ideological entrenchment reverberates directly into the contemporary geopolitical landscape, manifesting most acutely in the plight of the migrant subject. Displaced by the long-term economic precarity, political instability, and cultural fractures left in the wake of empire, the migrant arrives at the metropolitan center only to find themselves trapped within its lingering systemic logics. Here, the modern nation-state continues to operate through exclusionary cartographies, reducing the migrant to an expendable, spectral entity. Within this dominant order, their lived experiences, histories, and ontological realities

are systematically denied, framed not as human lives shaped by global structural violence, but as administrative anomalies or threats to be managed, detained, or erased. The violence of colonial imposition does not merely alter political borders; it fundamentally fractures the colonized subject's sense of reality. As Frantz Fanon famously diagnoses in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the trauma of racial subjugation is rooted in an enforced cultural displacement:

"Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him." (Fanon, 1952, p. 83)

The initial dislocation diagnosed by Fanon, the abrupt severing from ancestral frameworks and the internalization of a foreign standard, serves as the foundational wound for the modern migrant experience. In both *BL* and *BTB*, the male partners internalize this systemic objectification, desperately attempting self-validation through the very institutions and economic engines that structurally exclude them. Their rigid adherence to teleological myths functions as an anxious defense mechanism against the terrifying recognition of total dispossession. When these protective mechanisms inevitably fail, whether a financial crash obliterates livelihoods or bureaucratic walls crush academic ambitions, the illusion of upward mobility shatters. Stripped of these mediating structures, subjects are cast out of comfortable conformity and thrust into absolute contingency. This profound descent into rootless uncanniness and existential dread marks the definitive closure of the study's first analytical movement. By tracing the trajectory from initial thrownness within fatalistic, patriarchal, and capitalist frameworks to violent systemic disruption, this axis maps the anatomy of the migrant ontological crisis. It demonstrates how Ali's and Mbue's fictional spaces mirror deep alienation, treating historical catalysts as objective correlatives of inner subjective dissolution.

Having established this phenomenological baseline, where illusions of destiny and socioeconomic salvation are obliterated and the catastrophe of meaning is laid bare, the study now transitions to its second axis: an interrogation of how characters confront this existential dread, abandon inauthenticity, and forge, through pragmatic, gendered agency, the arduous pathway toward authentic self-realization.

3. From Dread to Authentic Gendered Agency

The sudden dissolution of teleological safeguards and the catastrophic collapse of inherited *grand* narratives leave the migrant subject stranded in an open, unshielded expanse of absolute contingency. To linger in this paralyzing vacuum of meaning is to succumb to total despair; hence, the profound existential crisis mapped in the opening movement must inexorably give way to a second, more resolute phase of subjective reconstruction.

Within Ali's and Mbue's works, the transition from passive victims of structural determinism to architects of self-determination is neither smooth nor granted by external benevolence. Instead, it is forged through an arduous, highly localized, and relentlessly sustained process of pragmatic, gendered agency. When male figures such as Chanu and Jende

retreat into paralysis, psychological fragmentation, bitter nostalgia, or quietistic despair under the overwhelming weight of systemic failure, the female protagonists, Nazneen Ahmed and Neni Jonga, are compelled to cross the threshold from submissive endurance to active self-constitution. Demonstrating her refusal to be reduced to a passive domestic appendage under the guise of patriarchal protection, Neni fiercely asserts her independence when Jende attempts to strip away her employment and education:

"With Liomi at school, he could spend some alone time with Neni and help her around the house [...] Her back had been aching unceasingly [...] he'd asked her to stop working and take only the minimum number of classes needed to retain her student visa [...] 'But I like to work,' Neni had protested [...] Work will be there for you when you're ready, he assured her [...] I'll go out there and work four jobs before I let you go to work in pain and discomfort, he promised her. A week after she quit her job, he took his dedication to her a step further and informed her that she was going to take off the upcoming spring and summer semesters and stay home after the baby arrived in December. 'No!' she immediately responded [...] 'I'm not taking off any time from school.'" (Mbue, 2016, pp. 170-171)

This exchange exposes a fundamental ideological clash between Jende's paternalistic impulse to shield his wife and Neni's vital imperative to maintain her own self-determination. Jende operates from a traditional framework where male provision is equated with total authority, framing his micromanagement of Neni's time and labor as an act of benevolent sacrifice (*"I'll go out there and work four jobs"*). However, this well-intentioned paternalism functions as an insidious form of containment that threatens to erase Neni's autonomy, reducing her to a static object of his protection rather than an active agent in her own right. Neni's immediate and unyielding rejections, *"but I like to work" and "I'm not taking off any time from school,"* shatter the paralyzing vacuum of systemic contingency by anchoring her identity in practical, self-authored labor. By fiercely defending her labor and education against Jende's suffocating stewardship, Neni rejects the quietistic despair that immobilizes her male counterparts. Her resistance demonstrates that authentic gendered agency is not handed down by benevolent external structures, but is instead forged through the courageous, daily refusal to let well-meaning domestic confinement eclipse one's sovereign right to self-constitution.

Before an agent can fiercely articulate her autonomy against external domestic policing, however, she must first survive and recognize the psychological erasure embedded within the daily machinery of the domestic sphere. Patriarchal oppression does not always manifest as overt tyranny; frequently, it operates through the banal, unyielding rhythm of household chores designed to reduce a woman's horizons to the four walls of the flat. For Nazneen, entrapment is initially experienced not as a sudden crisis, but as a slow, rhythmic vanishing act where her identity is continuously absorbed by the endless cycle of cleaning, cooking, and waiting. Yet, even within this claustrophobic landscape of quiet endurance, the human psyche quietly rebels, seeking moments of transcendent focus that hint at a buried, unyielding subjectivity waiting to break through the surface of passive compliance, as Monica Ali illustrates:

"Nazneen's daily existence is mapped out entirely through domestic servitude, where she cleaned, cooked, and watched Chanu depart, her own life reduced to a silent routine. Yet, even in the stillness of her confinement, a deeper consciousness flickered: While she sat, she was no longer a collection of the hopes, random thoughts, petty anxieties and selfish wants that made her, but was whole and pine." (Ali, 2003, pp. 39-40)

This moment in *BL* captures the psychological core of what Simone de Beauvoir defines as *immanence*, the state of being trapped in repetitive, non-creative bodily maintenance while men are out engaging with the transcendent world of history, culture, and commerce. Nazneen's day is an exercise in total self-effacement: she feeds Chanu, watches him step out like a "band leader" into the public sphere, and eats standing up at the sink, literally consuming her own meals in the margins of his existence. Yet, the true brilliance of Ali's prose lies in Nazneen's brief escape through the television screen, watching ice-skating. In that graceful movement, Nazneen experiences a rare dissolution of her fragmented anxieties. To be "*whole and pine*" reveals that beneath the docile surface of the obedient migrant housewife lies an intact, waiting subjectivity. This quiet, hypnotic observation serves as the necessary psychological prerequisite to her later political and personal awakening, proving that before a woman can reject the structural confines of her world, she must first mentally reclaim the scattered pieces of her own soul from the relentless demands of domestic servitude.

Neni's fierce reclamation of her body and labor, alongside Nazneen's quiet psychological unravelling of domestic immanence, finds its rigorous philosophical grounding in a broader critique of how society manufactures gender. The philosophical trajectory leading into Simone de Beauvoir's famous thesis begins with a radical decoupling of human consciousness from biological essentialism. Traditional Western frameworks have long relied on the "*nature-as-destiny*" argument to rationalize the historical subordination of women, positioning anatomical differences as immutable proofs of social hierarchy. However, existentialist philosophy rejects the premise that "*essence precedes existence*," particularly when applied to human identity. By arguing that existence comes first, De Beauvoir insists that individuals are not handed a pre-packaged human nature by biology; instead, they must actively construct their meaning through choice, action, and resistance. The transition from an unreflective object of nature to a self-aware, autonomous agent requires breaking free from the myth of the eternal feminine. Consequently, any framework committed to liberation must first dismantle the foundational lie that social roles are written into flesh and bone. This reclamation of autonomy finds its philosophical zenith in Simone de Beauvoir's foundational thesis in *The Second Sex* (1949), wherein she asserts:

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product [...] called feminine. As she notes, children initially experience their bodies simply as tools for exploring the world, unburdened by sexual differentiation until society steps in to impose its categories." (De Beauvoir, 1949, p. 293)

This profound realization exposes socialization not as a natural maturation process, but as a deliberate architectural project designed to manufacture subservience. When De Beauvoir

asserts that civilization “elaborates” femininity, she highlights that gender is an ongoing performance and an enforced inscription, hammered into the developing human subject by cultural norms, institutional pressures, and daily expectations. For marginalized women, who face the compounding pressures of patriarchal domesticity and transnational economic exploitation, this condition of “immanence” is doubly entrenched, tethering them simultaneously to the domestic sphere and exploitative labor markets. To overcome this dual imprisonment, De Beauvoir’s existential framework demands a radical rupture. Authentic freedom cannot be passively received; it requires a defiant, courageous leap out of imposed roles. Breaking the closed horizons of oppression means rejecting the safety of being an “Other” defined by external gazes, allowing women to embrace the terrifying, exhilarating responsibility of self-creation and active resistance.

These existential awakening further scales outward to confront the institutional and systemic spatializations that enforce complete containment. Where the domestic sphere operated as an architectural cage of passive surveillance, Neni later faces the gatekeeping machinery of American educational capitalism when she pursues her career goals. Moving the analysis outward from private marriage dynamics to the public, systemic machinery that tries to funnel immigrant women of color away from elite or high-earning professions and into low-wage support roles, this exchange captures her direct confrontation with structural classism and institutional gatekeeping. As Mbue’s text illustrates, Neni faces institutional discouragement when the associate dean steers her away from pharmacy school toward ‘achievable’ lower-tier healthcare jobs given her status as an immigrant mother. Rejecting this condescending pragmatism, Neni defiantly retorts: “*I don’t want achievable*” (Mbue, 2016, p. 297).

This stark institutional exchange exposes how systemic capitalism and structural racism conspire to police the aspirations of marginalized subjects, framing structural barriers as natural limitations. The dean’s counsel masquerades as benevolent mentorship (“achievable goals”), yet it functions as an ideological apparatus designed to keep immigrant labor locked in low-mobility, subservient tracks. By advising Neni to settle for a “realistic” path given her financial stress, children, and temporary visa, the dean attempts to force her back into the very cycle of economic immanence that existentialism seeks to shatter. Neni’s four-word rejection “*I don’t want achievable*” is a breathtaking assertion of radical freedom. In existentialist terms, she refuses to let her future be mathematically predetermined by her current statistical “odds” or structural disadvantage. By demanding a horizon that goes beyond what the dominant social order deems safe or permissible for an immigrant housewife, Neni claims the absolute freedom to define her own essence through ambition, defiance, and resolute self-creation.

By translating this defiant existential refusal into an outward declaration, Neni rescues her resistance from the fleeting, private sphere of mere survival. She performs a deed that demands to be witnessed, recorded, and anchored in the shared world, echoing Hannah Arendt’s insight on how human action achieves permanence:

“In order to become worldly things [...] deeds and facts and events [...] must first be seen, heard, and remembered and then transformed, reified as it were, into things -into all sorts of records, documents, and monuments. The whole factual world of human affairs depends [...] upon the

presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and [...] on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things.” (Arendt, 1958, p. 95)

Plainly, Arendt emphasizes that unexpressed thoughts, speech, and actions are inherently ephemeral; left to themselves, they would “disappear as though they never had been.” Neni’s spoken defiance could easily be dismissed as a momentary emotional outburst inside a private bureaucratic office. However, Arendt’s framework shows that true political and existential significance requires moving from the invisible interior to the visible “factual world.” By using the concept of *reification*, Arendt explains how intangible human agency is turned into a durable artifact or record. Neni’s declaration transforms her from a passive statistic on the dean’s ledger into a concrete historical agent, creating a permanent rupture in the institutional architecture that cannot be easily swept away by administrative calculus. Accordingly, Neni’s labor is no longer the alienated, commodified exertion diagnosed by Marx (1844) in his early manuscripts, where human energy is inverted into an external, hostile master. Instead, through this worldly reification, her exertion becomes a conscious, self-directed praxis aimed at securing both bodily preservation and profound ontological dignity for her dependents, successfully reclaiming her labor from the jaws of capitalist exploitation to serve as the very vehicle of her liberation.

A parallel yet distinct transformation unfolds across the urban landscape of London in *BL*, where Nazneen gradually sheds the silent, unquestioned fatalism that defined her early years of confinement. Following the inexorable disintegration of Chanu’s professional standing, his public rejections by the British bureaucratic machinery, and his eventual, deeply reluctant decision to return alone to Bangladesh, Nazneen is left standing in the literal and figurative wreckage of her marital home. Rather than packing her bags to accompany her husband back into a traditional patriarchal environment that would instantly reinstate her complete subjugation and erase the fragile independence she has begun to cultivate, Nazneen makes the radical, thoroughly autonomous choice to remain in London. Ali’s novel details this definitive, courageous break from inherited teleology and marital dependence as she systematically dismantles the domestic illusions and emotional appeasements of her past:

“Chanu bought her an ivory comb. He bought a length of lilac silk [...] She told him to take it back. He found a romantic Bengali novel and read to her in bed [...] She told him to go back to his own books [...] Nazneen looked at the couple on the television screen, the false smiles, the made-up faces, the demented illusion of freedom chasing around their enclosure. Turn it off, she said.” (Ali, 2003, pp. 362-363)

Obviously, this rich, multilayered textual evidence underscores how Nazneen triumphantly transforms her position of domestic imprisonment into a space of absolute sovereignty. By rejecting Chanu’s paternalistic gifts and dismissing his superficial romantic gestures, she actively strips away the psychological safety nets of her subjugation. Her command to “turn it off” in front of the television’s “*demented illusion of freedom*” highlights her rejection of false, prescribed emancipations in favor of an unyielding, grounded reality. By subsequently casting off toxic obligations, such as paying off Mrs. Islam with “*take everything*,” she clears away

the wreckage of her marriage, allowing her to step boldly into the informal urban labor market as an independent seamstress, achieve financial self-sufficiency, and sever the invisible threads of patriarchal obligation that once tethered her to a script written before her birth.

The trajectory of Monica Ali's protagonist Nazneen in *BL* maps precisely onto the theoretical demands of Black feminist thought, challenging the limitations of mainstream, white-dominated feminist frameworks that historically prioritized gender over intersecting systems of oppression. As Nazneen transitions from a secluded, passive immigrant housewife into an economically independent agent, her development rejects narrow definitions of liberation that view patriarchal confinement solely as a product of individual domestic tyranny. Instead, her awakening requires an intersectional reckoning with the compounding realities of class subjugation, immigrant dislocation, and race. This profound emancipation process mirrors the acute insights of bell hooks in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, wherein hooks argues with fierce conviction that true liberation for marginalized, intersectionally oppressed women necessitates a deliberate, revolutionary movement from the passive, silenced margin into an active, vocal center of critical consciousness and self-definition:

"By repudiating the popular notion that the focus of feminist movement should be social equality of the sexes and emphasizing eradicating the cultural basis of group oppression, our own analysis would require an exploration of all aspects of women's political reality. This would mean that race and class oppression would be recognized as feminist issues with as much relevance as sexism. When feminism is defined in such a way that it calls attention to the diversity of women's social and political reality, it centralizes the experiences of all women, especially the women whose social conditions have been least written about, studied, or changed by political movements." (hooks, 1984, p. 27)

By arguing that race and class oppression must be recognized as feminist issues with as much relevance as sexism, hooks provides the exact vocabulary needed to interpret Nazneen's relationship with the garment industry. hooks critiques early feminist tendencies to reduce systemic issues to a simplistic *"man as enemy"* binary, an insight that prevents a reductive reading of Nazneen's husband, Chanu, as the sole source of her subjugation. While Chanu embodies patriarchal limitations, he is simultaneously trapped by the structural racism and economic alienation of post-industrial London. hooks' framework allows us to see that Nazneen's liberation does not rely merely on overcoming an individual man, but on navigating and rising above a multi-layered matrix of socio-economic exploitation.

In addition to the preceding analysis, hooks's insistence on centralizing the experiences of women *"whose social conditions have been least written about, studied, or changed by political movements"* (1984, p. 25) validates Nazneen's quiet, localized path to self-actualization. In traditional, Eurocentric feminist readings, domestic piecework performed by an isolated immigrant woman might easily be misread as mere subaltern entrapment or capitalist exploitation. However, hooks repositions material survival and economic labor as central sites of political reality. For Nazneen, the sewing machine transforms from an instrument of class drudgery into the robust material and psychological foundation for her complete self-actualization. She no longer looks out the window as a helpless spectator of a finished world;

she actively weaves her own reality into being, embodying hooks's theoretical demand for a feminism born from the margin.

Yet, this arduous reclamation of genuine agency and subjective autonomy does not occur in a cultural vacuum; rather, it requires an acute, sophisticated renegotiation of cultural hybridity, moving far beyond the painful, paralyzing ambivalence theorized by Homi K. Bhabha toward a conscious, empowered synthesis of transnational identities. Traditional postcolonial readings often risk treating cultural representations as fixed deformations, locking subaltern subjects into permanent cycles of trauma and mimicry. Bhabha critiques these static frameworks, arguing instead for an ambivalent understanding of power that accounts for the complex fractures within discourse:

"The closure and coherence attributed to the unconscious pole of colonial discourse and the unproblematized notion of the subject, restrict the effectivity of both power and knowledge [...] Nor would it be possible, without the attribution of ambivalence to relations of power /knowledge, to calculate the traumatic impact of the return of the oppressed - those terrifying stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy which are the signal points of identification and alienation, scenes of fear and desire, in colonial texts." (Bhabha, 1994, p. 72)

Bhabha's critique dismantles the illusion of a closed, coherent colonial or patriarchal discourse. By arguing that power must be understood through its "ambivalence" rather than static deformations, Bhabha provides the framework to analyze how cultural stereotypes and systemic expectations, such as the Western gaze upon Bangladeshi immigrant communities, function as "scenes of fear and desire." In *BL*, characters are constantly caught in these alienating spaces of identification. Yet, Nazneen's trajectory demonstrates that these ambivalent spaces are not permanent traps. By refusing the static roles assigned to her by both her traditional community and the surrounding British society, she exposes the fractures within power structures, harnessing the very ambivalence of power and knowledge to transform a site of alienation into a platform for a fully realized, self-authored transnational Cultural identity is rarely a static inheritance; rather, it functions as a dynamic negotiation between historical rupture and contemporary reinvention. As Stuart Hall eloquently contends in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," cultural identity is never an unalterable, essentialist recovery of some pure, lost past, but is instead a volatile, ongoing production that is always actively in process, constituted endlessly within representation, power, and history. This theoretical framework illuminates how colonized populations reclaim their histories, a process famously articulated by Frantz Fanon regarding the psychological necessity of historical reclamation. Hall underscores this vital endeavor, writing:

"In postcolonial societies the rediscovery of this identity is often the object of what Frantz Fanon once called a passionate research ... [seeking] some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others. New forms of cultural practice in these societies address themselves to this project for the very good reason that [...] Colonization is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain... [i]t turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it." (Hall, 1990, pp. 234-235)

This dynamic exposes colonialism not merely as a system of physical and economic extraction, but as an epistemological violence. By systematically erasing pre-colonial history, imperial powers engineered a psychological vacuum, substituting authentic historical memory with a manufactured narrative of native inferiority. Consequently, the “*passionate research*” described by Fanon is not a nostalgic retreat into escapism, but a radical act of political and psychological decolonization. Because colonial rule relies on instilling self-contempt and resignation, excavating a dignified past becomes an essential counter-measure. Still better, the splendid era sought by marginalized peoples serves a dual purpose: it repairs internal fractures of identity and self-worth while simultaneously challenging the external gaze of the oppressor, allowing cultural practices in postcolonial societies to transform historical erasure into a powerful force of self-determination.

In both Ali’s and Mbue’s masterworks, the female protagonists resolutely refuse the false binary trap of total, uncritical assimilation into the dominant host culture versus absolute, reactionary traditionalism. Instead, they boldly forge a complex third space of pragmatic survival, intellectual rigor, and profound ethical integrity. In *BTD*, Neni balances her grueling, bone-weary schedule of domestic labor and menial jobs with her rigorous, uncompromising pharmacy studies, refusing to let the systemic hostility of American immigration policies, racial prejudice, and institutional barriers define the ultimate boundaries of her intellectual capacity and professional dreams. Mbue highlights this quiet, indomitable resilience through Neni’s nocturnal reckoning with precarity, channeling her dread into a fierce, protective vision for her children:

“Timba was going to enter Limbe one day as a proud Cameroonian-American returning to see the land of her ancestors, not as the child of failed asylees tossed out of the country like food that had turned sour, while Liomi was to become a real American, even though his future rested entirely on a judge’s verdict. On the second night after receiving the deportation letter, as Neni spent hours staring into the darkness, she transformed this paralyzing anxiety into resolve; the next morning, as she ironed her children’s clothes, she sang the hymns the churchgoing people of Limbe sang when life gave them no answers to their questions.” (Mbue, 2016, p. 227)

This extended passage captures the profound psychological and ontological triumph of Neni’s developing agency, anchoring her ambition entirely in her children and demonstrating that her drive for professional and intellectual success is fundamentally relational. Rejecting the atomized, self-interested individualism of Western paradigms, Neni proves her survival and intellectual evolution are inextricably bound to her children’s futures, bridging her Cameroonian roots and her American reality. Further, the haunting simile of being tossed out like spoiled food exposes the disposable logic of state-sanctioned immigration bureaucracy; by rejecting this classification, Neni asserts an ontological counter-narrative, reclaiming her family’s human dignity against the cold calculus of legal status. The transition from sleepless dread in the dark to singing the hymns of Limbe while ironing her children’s clothes reveals a profound spiritual resilience. This ritualistic act is not passive resignation, but an active, sovereign synthesis, fusing ancestral faith with contemporary endurance to armor her family against a hostile socio-political landscape.

As Judith Butler articulates with profound clarity in *Undoing Gender*, human vulnerability is never merely a private deficiency, but is fundamentally and inextricably tied to our social interdependency, wherein bodily persistence relies upon fragile social networks, yet true agency emerges precisely when the living subject takes active, ethical responsibility for those precarious conditions. This theoretical framework provides a vital lens through which to view Neni's endurance in *BTD*, illuminating how her struggle for professional autonomy and personal survival is not an exercise in isolated, Western individualism, but an embodiment of a shared, relational existence. The Butlerian studies underscore this foundational interconnectedness, writing:

"If I am struggling for autonomy, do I not need to be struggling for something else as well, a conception of myself as invariably in community, impressed upon by others, impressing them as well [...] is this not another way of imagining community in such a way that it becomes incumbent upon us to consider very carefully when and where we engage violence... [For] grief contains within it the possibility of apprehending the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are from the start, and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own." (Butler, 2004, pp. 21-22)

This profound philosophical insight reframes Neni's maternal and professional sacrifices not as passive burdens, but as radical enactments of ethical responsibility. When Neni confronts the terrifying prospect of deportation, her anxiety is not self-contained; rather, it is a visceral manifestation of being "*beside oneself*," entirely given over to the lives of her children and husband. The systemic violence of American immigration policies targets this very "*primary tie*," seeking to fracture the relational webs that sustain immigrant families. Yet, by channeling her grief and terror into disciplined pharmacy studies and fierce maternal protection, Neni transforms her vulnerability into a site of resistance. Her journey demonstrates that authentic agency does not require transcending our dependency on others, but courageously embracing it as the very foundation of human dignity and community in the face of institutional erasure. Examining Neni's trajectory in the article "*Neoliberalism in Behold the Dreamers* by Imbolo Mbue: The Latest Menace to the American Dream," Cláudio Roberto Vieira Braga maintains,

"Neni simply cannot accept the end of the dream for herself and her family in the United States, passionately believing they should stay at all costs. Her stubbornness reflects the obsession with the American Dream; she considers marrying a US citizen and even putting their child up for adoption. In despair, she looks for help at a religious congregation. Once harmonious, the couple starts to quarrel constantly about it, but after some time she ends up packing to go back, still against her will. Neni as a character stand in opposition to Jende, which highlights the immigrant dilemma of believing or not believing in the dream, giving up or trying, and testing the limits of self-sacrifice and the meaning of perseverance." (Braga, 2020, p. 47)

Plainly, Braga's observation anchors the high-stakes existential crisis of immigration in the messy, often desperate realities of human behavior. By highlighting Neni's willingness to consider extreme measures, such as entering a marriage of convenience or placing her child up

for adoption, Braga reveals the corrupting, psychologically fracturing pressure that the American Dream exerts on marginalized individuals. Rather than romanticizing Neni's resilience, the critic exposes how systemic desperation forces impossible ethical compromises, turning the sacred bonds of family into calculated bargaining chips for survival.

Moreover, Braga's emphasis on the friction between Neni and Jende illuminates the novel's central thematic dichotomy. While Jende eventually yields to disillusionment, Neni's stubborn refusal to quit highlights a gendered dimension of the immigrant struggle. Her frantic efforts, seeking sanctuary in a church, planning desperate contingencies, and fiercely resisting repatriation, frame her not merely as a passive victim of neoliberal policy, but as an active combatant in a war of attrition. While Braga views Neni's tenacity as a reflection of an "*obsession with the American Dream*," this perspective can be read in tandem with the broader argument that her actions are driven less by myth-making and more by a fierce, instinctual duty to her kin. Braga's analysis successfully captures the internal fractures and marital strain produced by systemic violence, illustrating how the pursuit of survival can simultaneously unite and tear an immigrant family apart.

Within Ali's novelistic universe, Nazneen similarly finds an indispensable ethical anchor in her relationships, most notably through the enduring solidarity of her epistolary exchange with her sister, Hasina, and her burgeoning ties to London's politically awakening local community. Far from achieving autonomy in splendid, detached isolation, her profound self-discovery is richly mediated by a critical awareness of the shared struggles facing women under transnational patriarchal structures. She comes to recognize that her individual liberation is inextricably bound to the collective emancipation of the marginalized. The stark contrast between Nazneen's insulated domestic concerns and the brutal realities of transnational patriarchal violence is laid bare when she reflects on the gulf between their lives:

"Nazneen knew she would never write about him to Hasina. Her next letter [...] would follow in the footsteps of the others. 'We are all well [...] I pray for your friend Monju and her boy. What a poor answer it would make.' Hasina's letter had arrived yesterday: 'I tell you about friend Monju. Acid melt cheekbone and nose and one eye [...] Is worse see this good eye. Is where hope should be but no hope is there [...] Promise me the boy get his operation. What can I say? What to do?'" (Ali, 2003, p. 381)

The comprehensive trajectory from the paralyzing, inauthentic thrownness of the first analytical movement to the active, resilient, and gendered agency of the second thus reveals the complete, unbroken arc of the migrant ontological journey. By turning resolutely away from the false, comforting illusions of teleological *grand* narratives, whether the glittering, unattainable myth of the American Dream or the fatalistic, quietistic resignation of traditional cultural determinism, Nazneen Ahmed and Neni Jonga successfully confront the terrifying existential void and decisively conquer it through embodied praxis. They demonstrate with undeniable force that while the geopolitical, economic, and institutional structures of contemporary migration are frequently hostile, exclusionary, and deeply indifferent to human suffering, the human subject nonetheless possesses the radical, unquenchable capacity to re-author its own

existence, transforming the ash-heap of displacement and despair into the solid, unshakeable ground of authentic freedom.

4. Conclusion

This analytical investigation set out to interrogate the ontological dimensions of contemporary migration, displacement, and human thrownness through a comparative reading of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016). By examining how migrant subjects negotiate hostile geopolitical landscapes, this study sought to trace the complex trajectory from immersive inauthenticity within mediating teleological structures to the active forging of authentic, gendered agency. Through a sustained engagement with both literary texts, the current research mapped the structural violence of economic alienation, domestic confinement, and systemic crisis, while simultaneously highlighting how marginalized individuals break through inherited determinisms to reclaim their subjective autonomy.

The analysis was systematically structured across two core analytical movements. The first axis interrogated the phenomenology of thrownness and ontological rupture. Drawing upon foundational theoretical frameworks, it demonstrated how characters initially surrender their autonomy to overarching grand narratives, such as fatalistic resignation, patriarchal containment, and the teleological machinery of the American Dream. The study revealed how urban spaces in London and New York function not as sanctuaries of reverie, but as exclusionary sites of subaltern containment. This axis showed how macroeconomic catastrophes, such as the 2008 financial crisis, and domestic disintegration serve as objective correlatives that shatter protective illusions, plunging migrant subjects into the radical vertigo of existential dread. Building upon this baseline, the second axis transitioned from despair to subjective reconstruction; it explores how female protagonists like Nazneen Ahmed and Neni Jonga reject passive endurance. By turning to practical labor, educational perseverance, and relational solidarity, these characters transform instruments of exploitation into vehicles of liberation; they successfully asserting their agency against interlocking systems of oppression.

To achieve this depth of textual insight, the study employed an interdisciplinary methodology synthesizing existential phenomenology, Marxist alienation theory, spatial criticism, and postcolonial feminist critique. This methodological approach proved instrumental in decoding the multi-layered texture of the selected novels, allowing the analysis to bridge the gap between macro-level socioeconomic structures and micro-level psychological realities. By integrating concepts from philosophers and theorists such as Martin Heidegger, Simone de Beauvoir, Karl Marx, Frantz Fanon, Gaston Bachelard, and Hannah Arendt, the methodology illuminated the profound philosophical stakes embedded within contemporary migrant literature.

The results obtained through this method yield significant relevance across multiple academic disciplines. Within the domain of literature, the study discloses how narrative texts act as philosophical laboratories capable of articulating complex ontological conditions. In philosophy, the application of existential phenomenology to postcolonial texts enriches our understanding of freedom, bad faith, and human thrownness. Within sociology, the analysis sheds light on the lived experiences of undocumented labor, domestic entrapment, and the

intersectional burdens borne by migrant women. In politics, the findings underscore the urgent need to critique the structural exclusions inherent in global capitalism and immigration governance. However, this methodological framework is not without its limitations. While the phenomenological and existential approach successfully captures the subjective depth and psychological ruptures of the characters, it risks downplaying specific institutional, legal, and macroeconomic policy mechanics that govern transnational migration. By focusing exclusively on two Anglophone novels set in major Western metropolises, this study adopts a localized perspective that may not fully account for intra-African migrations, non-Western host nations, or rural diasporic experiences.

Addressing these methodological boundaries opens a refined, highly focused horizon for subsequent inquiry. Rather than proliferating scattered propositions, future scholarship might concentrate on a single, vital perspective: the intersection of contemporary algorithmic governance, digital surveillance, and migrant ontological alienation in metropolitan spaces. Examining how modern data-driven border controls reshape the existential boundaries of human thrownness and redefine the terrain of subaltern agency offers a rigorous and necessary extension of the present work.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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