

Existential Concerns in Selected Works of V. S. Naipaul, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Githa Hariharan

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ABSTRACT: This research paper examines existential concerns in selected novels by V. S. Naipaul, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Githa Hariharan through the concepts of alienation, identity, freedom, choice, responsibility, absurdity, nothingness, authenticity, anxiety, and the self-other relationship. Drawing on Dinesh Kumar's doctoral research, the paper uses close textual analysis to compare two novels by each writer: Naipaul's *Half a Life* and *The Magic Seeds*; Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *Oleander Girl*; and Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* and *Fugitive Histories*. The study argues that these texts present existential crisis not as an abstract philosophical problem alone. It is shaped by displacement, gendered social structures, cultural conflict, political intimidation, communal violence, and the individual's struggle to make meaningful choices. Naipaul's Willie Chandran embodies the instability of diasporic identity; Divakaruni's Draupadi/ Panchaali and Korobi negotiate selfhood through resistance, choice, and self-definition; and Hariharan's characters confront the pressure of ideology, religious intolerance, historical memory, and social violence. The paper therefore reads existentialism as a flexible interpretive framework in Indian Writing in English, while also emphasizing differences among the three writers. The analysis concludes that the selected works transform existential questions into culturally and historically situated inquiries about how individuals live, choose, remember, resist, and construct meaning.

Introduction

Literature has long been concerned with the question of what it means to live, to belong, and to make sense of a world that does not always provide stable answers. The relationship between literature and philosophy becomes particularly visible when literary characters confront uncertainty, isolation, freedom, responsibility, death, or the collapse of inherited meanings. The doctoral study on which this paper is based identifies existentialism as a significant way of reading selected works of V. S. Naipaul, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Githa Hariharan. It places their novels within Indian Writing in English and examines the ways in which individual existence is shaped by social, cultural, historical, and political circumstances. The selected texts are Naipaul's *Half a Life* (2001) and *The Magic Seeds* (2004), Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and *Oleander Girl* (2013), and Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* (2003) and *Fugitive Histories* (2009) (Kumar, "Introduction").

Existentialism as an Interpretive Framework

The Itdescribes existentialism as a philosophical and literary response to nothingness and absurdity that seeks meaning through individual experience. Peter Childs and Roger Fowler's formulation, cited in the thesis, emphasizes the attempt to discover meaning in and through experiences of nothingness and absurdity (Kumar, "Key Terms"). Jonathan Webber similarly associates existentialism with freedom at the core of human existence and with a theory of what it means to be human (Webber 2). These formulations are important because they shift

attention from universal abstractions to the lived situation of the individual. Existential reading consequently asks how a character experiences freedom, makes choices, encounters other people, responds to anxiety, and constructs or loses a sense of identity.

The Itorganizes its theoretical discussion around several related concepts: existential angst, freedom, responsibility, choice, identity, psychological identity, absurdity, alienation, nothingness, authenticity, self and other, subjectivity, anxiety, dread, and despair. These terms are not isolated categories. They operate together. Freedom produces the need for choice; choice entails responsibility; responsibility may generate anxiety; alienation may intensify the search for identity; and the recognition of absurdity may force a character to reconsider inherited meanings. Sartre's formulation that human beings define themselves through what they make of themselves is particularly relevant to the study because the selected novels repeatedly present characters who are compelled to negotiate identities rather than simply inherit them (Sartre, qtd. in Kumar, "Existential Freedom").

Existentialism in the Itis also distinguished from a single, rigid philosophical doctrine. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Sartre, Camus, Beauvoir, and other thinkers are discussed as contributors to a broad field of existential thought. The selected novels likewise demonstrate different forms of existential questioning. Naipaul's concern is strongly connected to displacement and diasporic identity; Divakaruni places questions of selfhood in relation to gender, migration, memory, and patriarchal structures; Hariharan connects existential crisis with political intimidation, communal conflict, historical memory, and the suppression of intellectual freedom. Thus, the existential framework creates a comparative vocabulary without erasing the distinct social worlds of the three writers.

Alienation and the Search for Identity in V. S. Naipaul

The Itreads *Half a Life* and *The Magic Seeds* as narratives of alienation, identity crisis, nothingness, and meaninglessness. Willie Chandran's movement across cultural and geographical spaces makes identity unstable rather than secure. His search for a meaningful self is repeatedly interrupted by displacement and by his inability to feel completely at home in any environment. It places this condition within Naipaul's wider representation of the diasporic subject, observing that alienation and loss of identity are closely related in his fiction (Kumar, "Chapter III").

Half a Life presents Willie as a character whose personal history becomes a source of uncertainty. His mixed social and familial background complicates his sense of belonging, while his movement away from India does not automatically produce freedom. Instead, geographical movement becomes another form of uncertainty. The existential significance of Willie's experience lies in the gap between movement and self-realization. He travels, forms relationships, and enters different social worlds, but none of these automatically supplies an authentic identity. The novel consequently questions the assumption that physical mobility necessarily produces existential freedom.

The thesis's discussion of Naipaul also emphasizes the relationship between alienation and the colonial experience. Colonial education and cultural displacement can make individuals strangers both within their own cultures and outside them. Robert D. Hamner's observation, cited in the thesis, describes Naipaul as caught between Western existentialism and Eastern aestheticism, belonging completely to neither (Hamner 115). This critical formulation helps explain why Naipaul's protagonists often appear suspended between competing cultural locations. Their crisis is not simply geographical; it is psychological and existential.

The Magic Seeds continues Willie's search. As the sequel to *Half a Life*, it develops the problem of selfhood through further experiences of political commitment, displacement, and uncertainty. The It argues that Willie eventually recognizes the futility of maintaining an idealized image of the world. The closing insight that "It is wrong to have an ideal view of the world" marks a movement away from an imagined perfect reality toward a more difficult acceptance of existence (Naipaul 294). In existential terms, this moment is significant because Willie's crisis becomes an opportunity to revise his expectations. He cannot control the world, but he can reconsider the assumptions through which he interprets it.

Naipaul's treatment of existentialism is therefore marked by ambiguity. Willie's search does not end in a simple discovery of a permanent identity. Instead, the novels reveal identity as provisional and vulnerable to circumstance. His inability to settle becomes the very condition through which the novels explore the instability of existence. The It accordingly reads Willie as a figure whose repeated displacement exposes the psychological consequences of living without a stable sense of belonging. His experience demonstrates that alienation can be both external and internal: a person may be geographically located while remaining existentially displaced.

Gender, Freedom, and Selfhood in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *Oleander Girl* expand the existential discussion by placing women's identity at the center of the inquiry. The It argues that *The Palace of Illusions* reinterprets the Mahabharata from a woman's point of view and thereby foregrounds questions that are marginalized in conventional representations of the epic. Draupadi's experience is shaped by loneliness, alienation, restricted freedom, and fragmentation of self, but her narrative voice also becomes a means of asserting individuality (Kumar, "Chapter IV").

The renaming of Draupadi as Panchaali is especially important in the thesis's interpretation. A name is not merely a label; it becomes a means through which the character negotiates inherited identity. The movement from Draupadi, associated with her father Drupada, to Panchaali, associated with the kingdom of Panchala, can be read as an attempt to define the self rather than accept an identity imposed by others. The It connects this struggle with Simone de Beauvoir's account of woman as socially defined in relation to man (Beauvoir 44). Divakaruni's narrative therefore turns the existential question of "Who am I?" into a gendered question: who has the authority to define a woman's identity?

Panchaali's existential crisis is inseparable from the structures surrounding her. Her choices occur within a world in which marriage, family, duty, and patriarchal expectations place limits on autonomy. Yet the narrative does not reduce her to a passive victim. Her consciousness, narration, anger, desires, and reflections become forms of agency. The existential dimension emerges through the tension between circumstance and choice. She cannot select every condition of her life, but she can interpret and respond to those conditions. Her selfhood therefore develops through an ongoing negotiation between constraint and freedom.

Oleander Girl presents a different but related trajectory through Korobi. The It describes Korobi as a young woman who travels in search of her father and, more broadly, in search of an understanding of her own identity. Her journey involves migration, cultural difference, family secrets, racism, and emotional uncertainty. Her movement to America does not simply represent opportunity; it becomes an existential passage in which inherited assumptions about family and self are challenged. The discovery of previously unknown facts about her parents

causes a psychological transformation and forces her to reconsider the narrative through which she has understood herself (Kumar, “Chapter IV”).

Korobi’s choices are therefore central to the novel’s existential structure. She abandons a settled path when it becomes incompatible with her need to know the truth about her identity. The It characterizes her as strong-willed and capable of making bold choices that alter her destiny. This emphasis on choice connects Divakaruni’s fiction to existentialism while also showing the importance of gender. Freedom is not presented as unlimited autonomy. Instead, it is the difficult capacity to act meaningfully within circumstances that have already been socially and historically determined.

Taken together, *The Palace of Illusions* and *Oleander Girl* demonstrate that existential identity is relational. The individual discovers the self through encounters with family, society, gender expectations, cultural difference, and other people. Divakaruni’s women challenge identities that have been assigned to them and attempt to create identities that correspond more closely to their own experiences. The existential search thus becomes simultaneously a search for voice and agency.

Political Intimidation and Existential Freedom in Githa Hariharan

Hariharan’s *In Times of Siege* and *Fugitive Histories* place existential questions within contemporary political and social realities. *In Times of Siege* centers on Shiv Murthy, a university history professor whose academic work becomes the object of ideological opposition. According to the thesis, the conflict surrounding his chapter on Basava exposes the vulnerability of intellectual freedom when historical interpretation is controlled by ideological pressure (Kumar, “Chapter V”).

Shiv’s predicament is existential because the threat concerns more than professional disagreement. His identity as a teacher and scholar is challenged by forces that attempt to dictate what can be said about history. The pressure produces fear and uncertainty, yet the narrative also traces a movement toward resistance. Meena, a young woman living under Shiv’s guardianship while recovering from a broken leg, encourages him to raise his voice. Her intervention demonstrates the relational nature of existential agency: an individual’s capacity to choose may be strengthened through encounters with others. Freedom, in this context, is not solitary withdrawal but a decision to act despite pressure.

The It reads the novel as a critique of the suppression of truth and intellectual freedom by fundamentalist forces. The existential question is therefore connected to the politics of everyday existence. If a person is prevented from speaking, researching, or interpreting the past freely, the restriction affects the individual’s sense of self. Shiv’s identity crisis emerges from this conflict between his professional and ethical commitments and the social pressures surrounding him. The novel thus shows how political conditions can enter the most intimate dimensions of existence.

Fugitive Histories extends these concerns through the experiences of Mala, Sara, and Yasmin. The It describes the three women as psychologically and physically affected by violence and social prejudice, yet also as characters who attempt to rediscover themselves. Their stories are connected to the aftermath of communal violence and to the ways in which historical events enter personal memory. Here existentialism becomes a way of understanding how individuals live after violence and how they reconstruct a sense of self when the social world has been damaged.

The novel's concern with history is especially important. The Itemphasizes the idea that histories must be discovered rather than simply accepted. In this formulation, historical knowledge is linked to existential responsibility. To accept an imposed version of history without question can mean accepting an imposed understanding of oneself and one's community. By contrast, inquiry allows individuals to confront inherited narratives and reconsider their positions. The characters' efforts to understand their pasts therefore become part of their search for meaning.

Hariharan's fiction also complicates the relationship between individual and collective existence. The characters are not isolated philosophical subjects; their lives are shaped by religion, caste, gender, politics, family, and communal conflict. Yet these structures do not completely determine them. Their attempts to speak, remember, question, and act demonstrate that existential freedom can appear within oppressive circumstances. The novels consequently connect personal identity to the larger problem of how individuals remain human in environments marked by fear, intolerance, and distrust.

Comparative Discussion: Convergences and Divergences

A comparative reading of the six novels reveals a shared concern with the instability of identity, but the sources of existential crisis differ significantly. Naipaul's characters are strongly associated with displacement and cultural estrangement. Divakaruni's protagonists confront patriarchal expectations, gendered identity, migration, and family history. Hariharan's characters face ideological coercion, communal violence, and conflicts over historical interpretation. These differences are essential because they prevent existentialism from becoming a universal abstraction detached from context.

The first major point of convergence is alienation. Willie is alienated through cultural displacement; Panchaali experiences alienation within patriarchal structures; Korobi encounters cultural and familial estrangement; Shiv experiences institutional and ideological isolation; and the women in Fugitive Histories experience the consequences of violence and social fragmentation. Alienation therefore operates at several levels: geographical, cultural, gendered, institutional, psychological, and political.

The second convergence is identity. In all six texts, identity is not presented as a fixed possession. It is negotiated through relationships, memory, social structures, and individual choices. Willie searches for a stable self across cultures. Panchaali challenges the identity imposed by patriarchal and familial structures. Korobi reconstructs her understanding of herself after discovering unsettling truths about her family. Shiv's professional identity is threatened when his historical scholarship becomes politically contested. Mala, Sara, and Yasmin reconstruct their identities in the aftermath of social trauma. The existential subject is consequently a subject in process.

Freedom and choice constitute another important point of comparison. Sartrean existentialism places considerable emphasis on the individual's capacity to choose and on the responsibility attached to choice. The selected novels, however, demonstrate that choices are always made within circumstances. Willie's choices are shaped by displacement; Panchaali's by gendered structures; Korobi's by migration and family history; Shiv's by political intimidation; and Hariharan's women by violence and communal divisions. The novels therefore suggest a situated form of existential freedom: individuals exercise agency without ever becoming completely independent of history and society.

The concept of authenticity also helps connect the texts. Authenticity in existential thought involves accepting responsibility for one's existence rather than simply adopting identities imposed by others. In Naipaul, the movement toward authenticity requires confronting the inadequacy of idealized expectations. In Divakaruni, it involves claiming the right to narrate and define oneself. In Hariharan, it involves speaking or remembering in circumstances where dominant ideologies attempt to control truth. Authenticity is consequently an active process rather than a final state.

At the same time, the writers differ in tone and emphasis. Naipaul's existential world is characterized by irony, displacement, and uncertainty. Divakaruni gives greater prominence to female consciousness, self-definition, and resistance to patriarchal limitations. Hariharan places existential questions within explicit political and communal contexts. The comparative framework therefore demonstrates both a common existential vocabulary and diverse cultural manifestations of existential crisis.

It itself notes that the writers share existential concerns while differing in their representations. This distinction is central to the value of a comparative study. Existentialism provides a common analytical framework, but the meanings of alienation, freedom, and identity are transformed by the cultural and historical conditions of each text. The result is not a single existential experience but a plurality of existential experiences.

Indian Writing in English and the Cultural Location of Existentialism

The selected works also invite a broader consideration of existentialism in Indian Writing in English. The Itnotes that questions of existence and identity are not foreign to Indian intellectual traditions and points to the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vedas, Puranas, and Panchatantra as texts that engage with human existence and the problem of how people should live (Kumar, "Introduction"). This observation does not mean that Indian traditions and European existentialism are identical. Rather, it indicates that questions of selfhood, duty, suffering, freedom, and meaning have multiple intellectual histories.

The cultural location of the three writers is especially important. Naipaul's fiction emerges from a diasporic condition shaped by colonial history and movement between cultures. Divakaruni's narratives connect India and the United States and repeatedly address migration, gender, family, and cultural memory. Hariharan's fiction is deeply attentive to contemporary India, particularly questions of political ideology, religious intolerance, intellectual freedom, and communal memory. Existentialism therefore becomes productive when it is used as a comparative lens rather than as a rigid template.

This cultural specificity also modifies the idea of the autonomous individual. Classical existential discussions can appear to privilege the individual confronting an apparently indifferent universe. The selected Indian novels frequently show that the individual is embedded in family, caste, gender, religion, history, and community. The self is formed through relationships and conflicts with others. The thesis's discussion of "self and other" is therefore particularly relevant: identity is not produced in isolation but through encounters with people and institutions.

The texts also demonstrate that existential questions can emerge from ordinary social structures. A marriage arrangement, a family secret, migration, academic research, a political protest, or a communal conflict can become an existential event when it forces a person to ask who they are and how they should act. In this sense, the novels expand the field of existential literary criticism by showing how philosophical questions become visible through social experience.

Research Methodology and Contribution

It states that the study uses primary and secondary research methodologies. Primary research consists of textual and analytical study of the selected novels, while secondary research draws on books, research journals, websites, magazines, library sources, and related scholarship. The key concepts include alienation, identity crisis, anxiety, choice, responsibility, absurdity, nothingness, meaninglessness, death, reality, and illusion. The research also attempts to situate the writers in their socio-historical contexts (Kumar, “Research Methodology”).

For a research-paper format, this methodology can be understood as comparative close reading guided by existential concepts. The method is interpretive rather than empirical: it does not attempt to measure existential experience statistically. Instead, it identifies patterns in characterization, narrative perspective, conflict, choice, memory, and social pressure. The comparative method makes it possible to identify shared concerns while maintaining the differences among the authors.

The contribution of the study lies in bringing six novels by three Indian writers into a single existential framework. Existing discussions may focus on individual writers, gender, postcolonialism, diaspora, political conflict, or feminism; the Itproposes that existentialism can connect these concerns without reducing them to one another. Its central insight is that existential crisis is culturally and historically situated. The individual searches for meaning not in an empty abstract universe alone but within concrete structures of family, culture, migration, gender, politics, and history.

Conclusion

The selected novels of V. S. Naipaul, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Githa Hariharan demonstrate the continuing relevance of existential questions in Indian Writing in English. Their characters confront uncertainty, alienation, identity crisis, anxiety, freedom, responsibility, and the need to make choices. Yet the forms these concerns take are different. Naipaul presents the diasporic subject who struggles to establish a stable identity across cultures. Divakaruni foregrounds women who negotiate selfhood against patriarchal expectations, family histories, migration, and social constraints. Hariharan examines individuals whose existence is threatened by ideological pressure, communal violence, and the suppression of intellectual and historical freedom.

The comparative analysis shows that existentialism is most productive when it is treated as an interpretive vocabulary rather than a fixed formula. Alienation, freedom, choice, and identity recur across the six novels, but they acquire different meanings according to context. Willie’s displacement cannot be equated with Panchaali’s gendered alienation, nor can either be equated with Shiv’s political intimidation or the trauma experienced by the women in Fugitive Histories. Their differences are precisely what make the comparison meaningful.

The study also suggests that existential identity is constructed through action and reflection. Characters become aware of themselves through choices, encounters, losses, memories, and conflicts. No one possesses complete freedom, but each confronts situations that require some form of response. The novels consequently resist the idea that meaning is simply given. Meaning is negotiated through experience, and sometimes through resistance.

It concludes that the existential examination of these works raises questions extending beyond literary aesthetics to concrete human realities. The texts do not necessarily provide final solutions to the problems they dramatize. Instead, they make visible the complexity of

living in a world marked by displacement, social pressure, ideological conflict, gender inequality, and historical trauma. Their lasting value lies in this capacity to make readers reconsider the relationship between existence and choice, individual identity and collective history, and freedom and responsibility.

Ultimately, the selected works show that the existential search is not a solitary philosophical exercise. It is embedded in the social world. To ask “Who am I?” is also to ask where one belongs, who has the right to define one’s identity, which histories one accepts, what choices remain possible, and how one responds to circumstances that cannot be completely controlled. In this sense, Naipaul, Divakaruni, and Hariharan transform existentialism into a culturally situated exploration of human dignity, selfhood, and the difficult pursuit of meaningful existence.

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