



THE GAZE OF THE OTHER: SARTRE'S "LE REGARD," DE BEAUVOIR, AND RELATIONAL SELFHOOD IN *THE WEARY GENERATIONS*

Waseem Uddin
waseemuddeen@hotmail.com

Assistant Professor of English, College Education Department, Govt.
of Sindh, Karachi, Pakistan.

Dr. Irfan Muhammad
irfan@uok.edu.pk

Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Department of Philosophy,
University of Karachi, Karachi, Pakistan.

Abstract

The present study reads relational selfhood in Abdullah Hussein's *The Weary Generations* (Udaas Naslein) through Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of "the Look" (le regard) and Simone de Beauvoir's extension of that concept to the situation of women. Naim, the novel's protagonist, is so confused about his own being that his attempts to define himself remain incomplete; he does not commit to one particular mode of living but prefers instead a continuous unfolding of the self, and it is this restlessness that earlier scholarship, including the authors' own prior study, has read largely as a solitary confrontation with freedom. This paper argues that such a reading leaves out something structurally important: Naim is never free in isolation. He is constantly looked at, judged, and placed by family, community, and colonial authority, and it is against this gaze, not apart from it, that his freedom has to be measured. The paper then turns to the novel's female characters, Azra and Bano (earlier known as Champa), who are looked at and judged in much the same manner as Naim but are rarely permitted his freedom to leave, to withdraw, or to redefine the terms on which they are seen. Using hermeneutical close reading of the novel alongside Sartre and de Beauvoir, the study suggests that *The Weary Generations* does not merely trace one man's burden of freedom; it also registers, almost in spite of itself, how unevenly that freedom is distributed between men and women in a colonial and postcolonial world.

Keywords: *Gender, Intersubjectivity, Partition, Relational Selfhood, Simone de Beauvoir, The Look.*

Corresponding Author: Waseem Uddin (Assistant Professor of English,
College Education Department, Govt. of Sindh, Karachi, Pakistan)
Email: waseemuddeen@hotmail.com

1. Introduction

The *Weary Generations* is an epic novel that portrays the partition of the subcontinent. It begins in the early twentieth century, a time of great unrest throughout the world, especially in the subcontinent, due to a continued subjection of the Indian people at the hands of the British. A group of people with mixed religious beliefs opposed British rule and formed political parties that systematically campaigned for freedom. Differences later grew among them; Muslims wanted a separate homeland in the areas where they existed in the majority, and this struggle is manifest throughout the novel. The lead character, Naim, is an embodiment of change and transience (Hussein, 2014). He is so prone to change that his self is submerged in the attempt to decipher meaning for himself. A man of reasonable education to understand the dynamics of his times, Naim participates in political discussions from a very young age, is part of the Muslim elite of British India, and together with the literate minds of the country comes to believe that foreign occupation must be overthrown for self-rule.

Prior existentialist readings of the novel, including the authors' own earlier study (Uddin et al., 2026), have concentrated on Naim's solitary confrontation with freedom: his refusal to commit to any single mode of living, his anxiety in the face of unstructured choice, and his pursuit of an authentic self. What such readings leave largely unexamined is Naim's relation to "the others." Sartre grappled extensively with this concept, emphasizing the role of human relationships in shaping individual identity and the existential tension that arises from our encounters with other people (Sartre, 1956). We are what we are not. "The Other" makes us who we are. De Beauvoir expounds on this relational, and gendered dimension of the novel with especial connection to Naim, Azra and Bano in the context of self-identity. These characters internalize societal expectation and in return the external authority defines who they tend to be (de Beauvoir, 2011).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sartre's "The Look" and the Problem of the Other

The problem of the "Other" as highlighted by Sartre connects too well to the characters under discussion. Sartre emphasizes the role of human relationships in constructing our social identities. The way others look at us objectify our existence. Furthermore, we experience a deep sense of self-objectification that stems out of the fact that we are all the time judged by others (Sartre, 1956). As a result, it leads to feelings of vulnerability, shame and a desire to abide by the societal expectations. Knowingly and unknowingly, this process happens at both ends simultaneously; we and the other become objects for each other.

Therefore, the concept of bad faith is reaffirmed here. Sartre essentially terms this objectification living in bad faith. We live by what the "other" decide for us as outlined by the society over time. Individuals often engage in self-deception, concealing their true

intentions and desires to subscribe to what others hold acceptable for them. Sartre says that this state leads to inauthenticity of character. Authentic existence, on the contrary, involves exercising freedom, taking responsibility of our choices and acknowledging the impact of our actions on others around us (Sartre, 1956). Recent scholarship continues to read the look this way, as a matter of power rather than perception alone: Song (2024) argues that the gaze sets up an unequal relationship between the one who looks and the one who is looked at, one that narrows the freedom of whoever is being watched.

2.2. De Beauvoir's Extension: The Other as Gendered Position

Similarly, De Beauvoir adds to Sartre's ideas by deciphering the role of the "other" in making of self-identity (de Beauvoir, 2011). She argues that women are born into this world without predetermined meanings or purposes. Nonetheless, they face external influences that constrain their freedom and expression. The gendered expectations that a society associates with women further curb their choices. This objectification and oppression deny women any chance to realize their full potential. De Beauvoir's feminist existentialism lays importance on breaking free from such constraints; women, she states, must proactively define their own essence and reject any roles that are prescribed by the "other". How much room this actually leaves for a woman's own agency remains debated in recent scholarship: Langley (2024) argues that even under conditions of oppression, de Beauvoir's woman keeps a residual capacity for agency, one that oppression narrows but does not fully erase.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir pushes this argument a step further and insists that an authentic, intersubjective existence requires willing the freedom of the other as one wills one's own (de Beauvoir, 1948). An existence built on the objectification of another person is, on this account, an ethical failure and not merely an existential one; genuine recognition requires that the Look be mutual, so that each subject sees the other as a freedom rather than a fixed nature to be used or governed. Taken together, Sartre's Look and de Beauvoir's gendered extension of it give this paper a vocabulary for asking not simply whether a character is free, but whose freedom, once looked at, is allowed to remain freedom.

2.3. Existentialism, Gender, and Urdu Fiction: Existing Scholarship

Existentialist thought is a relatively recent presence in Urdu literature, but a few works of this philosophical tilt may usefully be set alongside the present study, if only to show that Existentialism has found its roots in almost every literary tradition. Intizar Hussain's short story "Akhri Aadmi" depicts a man's quest to remain human after an entire town transforms into monkeys as punishment for disobeying a stranger's warning; the lead character, Alyasaf, resists transformation for most of the story by suppressing his own anger, fear, and anxiety, only to succumb in the end through a small act of trickery of his own (Hussain, 2007). Anxiety, fear, terror, alienation, and angst sit at the core of that

struggle, much as they do in *The Weary Generations*. Quratulain Haider's *Aag Ka Darya* (River of Fire) takes up a different existential theme, that of time: its leading characters, across four widely separated ages, each carry an existential burden that seems to pass from one generation to the next, in a manner not unlike Heidegger's account of temporality (Haider, 2010). What both works share with *The Weary Generations* is an interest in individual anguish; what they do not share, and what the present study takes up, is any sustained interest in the intersubjective and gendered dimensions of that anguish. Scholarship on *The Weary Generations* specifically has tended to foreground Naim as the central existential subject (Uddin et al., 2026), leaving the gaze of others, and the position of the novel's women, comparatively unexamined. More recent scholarship on Partition fiction has begun to close this gap from the other direction, by starting with gender rather than arriving at it. Asif (2024), studying Partition novels by Muslim women, shows how physical and social space itself becomes gendered terrain in this fiction, with certain streets, rooms, and cities marked safe or unsafe for women amid Partition violence — a spatial version of the very asymmetry this paper locates in the gaze. Joshi (2022), reading *The Weary Generations* alongside Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, argues that Pakistani Partition novels stage an affective counter-history against mainstream nationalist narratives of independence; the present study extends this attention to whose perspective organises the novel's affect to the specifically gendered distribution of the gaze within Hussein's text.

3. Methodology

The present study is qualitative and employs hermeneutics as its mode of interpretation. Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation that grew out of phenomenology, and its purpose, on Gadamer's account, is above all to guard against misunderstanding: to go beyond the aesthetic, historical, and hermeneutical prejudices that stand between a reader and a text, so that meaning can be approached without being lost to alienation (Gadamer, 2008). A text cannot, on this view, be detached from its own historicity; understanding is always a matter of carrying a text's language and its moment forward together, which is why the same interpretive posture adopted in the authors' broader research on *The Weary Generations* is retained here (Uddin et al., 2026).

Rather than imposing Sartre's and de Beauvoir's philosophical writing on the novel as an external grid, the analysis proceeds by close reading: identifying scenes in which characters are watched, judged, described by others, or reduced to a social role, and asking what kind of selfhood, if any, survives that reduction. The primary textual evidence is drawn from Abdullah Hussein's *The Weary Generations* (Hussein, 2014). The primary philosophical sources are Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1956), de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (de Beauvoir, 2011), and de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (de Beauvoir, 1948). The analysis below is organised around three sites of the gaze in the

novel: Naim's relation to family, community, and colonial authority; Azra's position within marriage; and Bano's trajectory across the three parts of the novel. A concluding section then asks what, if anything, the novel offers by way of reciprocal recognition between its subjects.

4. Analysis

4.1. Naim Under the Gaze: Family, Community, and the Colonial Other

The parental void that Naim experiences is reflected in his personality throughout the novel. He spends the years leading up to his adulthood in a kind of solitude that is difficult both to understand and to relate to; his father, Niaz Baig, spent twelve years in prison for making arms as a hobby, and the bond between father and son could never be properly established, because Naim was taken away by his uncle, Ayaz Baig, while still very young. Ayaz Baig tries, not altogether successfully, to make up for this incompleteness. It is only later, and with some regret, that Naim learns anything of substance about his biological father, a disclosure that arouses in him a curiosity to seek the man out. Before this, Naim has already developed a kind of likeness for Azra, who later becomes his spouse, and their intimacy increases as he frequents her house (Hussein, 2014). In Sartrean terms, Naim's identity arrives as something already fixed in the minds and conversations of his elders before he can contest or confirm it: he discovers that he has already been seen, named, and placed within a story that is not, in the first instance, of his own making (Sartre, 1956).

Naim cannot, in any case, outlive the communal bond. He serves "the others" in order to be recognised as an individual and to exert his own will, yet he becomes increasingly independent of them, especially after the death of the uncle who raised him. His preoccupation with one pursuit after another leaves him, in a way, indifferent to many of the characters around him; his only unconditional sincerity is perhaps reserved for Mahinder Singh, with whom he spends a good deal of time in the village as an adult, and who meets him again, years later, in Marseilles during the war (Hussein, 2014). The colonial apparatus itself operates as a particularly totalising form of the Look: under British rule, the colonised subject is categorised, surveilled, and assigned a fixed administrative identity, and Naim's later disillusionment with the freedom struggle suggests an uneasy recognition that the political order he fought to escape risked being replaced by communal gazes no less constraining. This is close to what recent Fanon scholarship describes as the deeper work of colonial domination: Jilani (2023) argues that colonialism operated not only through control of territory but through a remaking of subjectivity itself, so that the colonised self is constituted and reconstituted in dialectical relation to the coloniser's gaze. Naim experiences a milder version of this remaking twice over — first as a subject of empire, and later, on different terms, as a subject of the very community that opposes it.

What distinguishes Naim, at every stage, is that he is consistently able to leave. When the gaze of uncle, comrade, or coloniser threatens to harden into a fixed identity, he returns to his village, enlists, withdraws into solitude, or simply disengages once circumstances no longer satisfy him. It is this capacity for flight, available to Naim at every turn, that separates his experience of the gaze from that of the novel's women, as the following two sections attempt to show.

4.2. Azra and the Stilling of the Self: Marriage as Object-Status

Naim's liking for Azra develops before he even finishes settling his uncle's affairs, and their intimacy grows as he visits her house with increasing frequency, until, in due course, they marry (Hussein, 2014). What the novel does not do, at any point in this courtship, is grant Azra a comparable interior life. The narrative records Naim's perspective throughout; Azra is visible to the reader chiefly as she is visible to Naim — a figure approached, courted, and eventually married, rather than a consciousness independently weighing or resisting that course. This is close to the asymmetry de Beauvoir identifies as constitutive of woman's position as Other: man is the subject through whose perspective the story is organised, and woman is that which is seen, wanted, and settled into place (de Beauvoir, 2011). A comparable dynamic has recently been traced in other literary contexts: Tucker (2024), reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* through Sartre, shows how a husband's look can settle over a wife and fix her as a diagnosed object, one to be managed and left alone, even while her own consciousness continues on, unseen, elsewhere in the text. Azra's situation is quieter than this, and far less overtly cruel, but the underlying mechanism is much the same: Naim's look fixes her within the story of his own courtship, and the narrative never crosses over into whatever she might be thinking on her own side of it.

When Naim eventually settles down as a farmer for a number of years after his marriage to Azra, it mars in him a true creativity that would otherwise arise from a synthesis of his own experiences, perspectives, and original thought (Hussein, 2014). This stagnation is narrated, in existentialist terms, as part of Naim's own burden — one more thing he must eventually shake off, as he in fact does, when he parts from his in-laws towards the end of the novel to look for other avenues. That departure belongs to Naim's ongoing self-authorship. Azra is given no equivalent scene: the novel never pauses to ask what remaining, or leaving, might cost her. In de Beauvoir's terms, her freedom is quietly absorbed into a domestic arrangement the text does not think to examine from her side (de Beauvoir, 1948).

4.3. Bano/Champa: The Other Without a Name

The character of Bano, earlier known as Champa in the novel, is important precisely for what she reveals about women who are denied social recognition apart from their association with a man. Her character portrays, in turn, several of the roles a woman

is made to occupy under financial compulsion or social pressure (Hussein, 2014). In the first part of the novel she is a sister to a revolutionary group of which Naim is also a member, and falls in love with him, wanting him to stay. The third part introduces her as a prostitute, where she meets Ali, Naim's half-brother. Finally, towards the end of the novel, she is shown as a labouring woman earning for herself and her child. Her very name changes across these stages, from Champa to Bano, a detail that is itself emblematic of de Beauvoir's claim that woman is granted no stable, self-authored essence, but is repeatedly redescribed according to whatever role a given social arrangement requires of her: sister, beloved, prostitute, mother (de Beauvoir, 2011).

Bano's trajectory cannot be explained by appeal to her own existential choices in the way Naim's restlessness can. Her movement between social positions is driven by financial compulsion and by the demands others place upon her; she is looked at, categorised, and morally judged at every stage — by the revolutionary circle, by clients, by the social order that names a woman in her position a prostitute — yet she is rarely permitted by the narrative to redefine the terms on which she is seen. Her situation exemplifies, more starkly even than Azra's, the condition Sartre describes as being made into an object by the Look of another (Sartre, 1956), compounded here by economic precarity and by the complete absence of the alternatives — flight, solitude, withdrawal — that remain available to Naim throughout.

4.4. Reciprocity Withheld: Why the Novel's Look Never Becomes Recognition

De Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* insists that an authentic, intersubjective existence requires more than the assertion of one's own freedom; it requires willing the freedom of the other as one wills one's own (de Beauvoir, 1948). Measured against that standard, *The Weary Generations* offers very little reciprocal recognition between Naim and the women in his life. His most unguarded, mutually recognising relationships are, notably, with men: his solitude with Mahinder Singh, his quiet companionship with Anees Rehman near a river (Hussein, 2014). These are the occasions on which two consciousnesses appear to meet on comparatively equal terms, free of the asymmetry that otherwise structures his encounters with Azra and Bano.

The novel's emotional architecture, in other words, reserves genuine existential reciprocity for relationships between men, while its female characters remain positioned mostly as objects within Naim's unfolding story rather than as subjects of comparable stories of their own. This is perhaps not so much a failure of the novel as a faithful registration of the social world it depicts — colonial and postcolonial Punjab, in which women's mobility, economic independence, and narrative voice were all, in one way or another, structurally constrained. Read through de Beauvoir, this fidelity becomes itself the point of existentialist interest: the novel does not simply illustrate one man's struggle with freedom, but maps, more troublingly, how freedom in this world is unevenly

distributed — granted as a live possibility to some, and withheld, through the accumulated weight of others' gazes, from those who need it most.

5. Conclusion

Naim, the lead character, is so confused about his own being that his attempts to define himself remain incomplete. As a result, he does not commit to one particular mode of living but rather prefers a continuous unfolding of the self, a fact that earlier scholarship, including the authors' own, has already established. What the present study adds is an account of how that unfolding is never purely self-authored: it is always negotiated against the gazes of family, community, and colonial authority, and, more importantly, against the fact that the novel's female characters are denied any equivalent negotiating capacity of their own. Naim retains, throughout, the capacity to look back, to leave, and to choose again; he is, as it were, everywhere in chains yet free, which is itself a kind of paradox. Azra and Bano face comparable, and in Bano's case considerably harsher, structures of objectification, yet the novel affords them little of the narrative interiority, or the practical freedom, that it affords Naim.

Read through de Beauvoir's extension of Sartre's account of the Look, this asymmetry is not incidental to the novel but constitutive of it: it reproduces, within the novel's fictional world, the broader existentialist insight that being-for-others is rarely distributed evenly, and that women in particular have historically borne the position of Other against which a freer, self-defining subjectivity is constructed elsewhere. The burden of freedom that earlier scholarship locates in Naim alone (Uddin et al., 2026) is, on this reading, at least a burden he is permitted to carry, argue with, and eventually put down. Future research might usefully examine how other Partition-era Urdu novels distribute the burdens of the gaze along lines of gender and class.

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