

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

**The Crisis of Existence in “Padma Nadir Majhi” and “The Hairy Ape”:
A Comparative Approach to ‘Kuber’ and ‘Yank’**

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ABSTRACT

Sometimes, rather most often, some questions, raised by the *impuissant*, are never answered; rather suppressed. Some are never raised as the *powerless people*, who do not possess the internal and external courage to pose the hundreds of unanswered questions regarding survival, have been in severe crisis of existence throughout their life span- living as inferior, in terms of every acknowledged and unacknowledged fundamental needs, among the superior-as an evidence and representative of furtive humanity. This work is an attempt to point out the psychological and physiological crises of Kuber and Yank, that are contributed by the conflicting factors and forces exist in the society where extreme dichotomy prevails between and among the people of two opposite classes : one is the upper class, that always endeavors to exploit the opposite class and, sometimes, homogenous class as well and the other is the lower class that is always exploited in different forms with the mechanical tools adopted cunningly, foolishly, intentionally, unintentionally and consciously or subconsciously by the upper class. Though Yank, a bold, arrogant, truculent, fiercer, realistic stoker and Kuber, a timid, lovable, passionate, convenient, stronger, skeptic boatman, belong to the lower class of two dissimilar societies and bear the testimony of two cultures, both of them go through the severe crisis of existence, in different forms, the contribution of both of their society and themselves, and both of them persistently struggle to seal their survival but, ultimately, all their ventures remain barren.

Key Words: Alienation, Belongingness, Crisis, Commodification, Illusion, Survival

Yank is the central character of “The Hairy Ape”, an expressionistic drama, published in 1922 by Eugene o’Neil, that depicts the crisis of the working class people through the experience of Yank with an intention to mock the stupidity, artificiality, brutality and essencelessness of the then American society. Kuber is the central character -off course with some hypothetical contradictions among the critics some of whom want to label the title ‘Hero’ to

Hossain Miya, another influential character of Padma Nadir Majhi, a social and regional novel, published in 1936 by Manik Bandhopaddhay. Padma Nadir Majhi picturizes the crisis of extreme lower class people thorough the experience of Kuber and his neighbors. The crisis of Yank, greatly contributed by his sense of belongingness and socio-economic structure of his society, is more a psychological; while the crisis of kuber is contributed

by his biological impulse, extreme poverty and social structure where survival is the urge.

The society of Yank is a capitalist society where extreme class division accelerates the conflict of forces- sense of belongingness, inferiority of the working class people, artificial superiority of the upper class- but that conflict is an unequal one. Yank, unlike Paddy or Long who also belong to the working class people, has much more sense of belongingness throughout the whole play and he wants to rebel against the superstructure and the representative, Mildred Douglas, of upper class. He seems to be a proletariat who wants to eliminate the inequality and introduce the proletariat revolution that should be the ultimate result of dialectic conflicting forces in the current industrial society where the workers are oppressed that leads to the ultimate depression and ignites the working class people with a self-destructive sense of revolution. The extreme depression, that ultimately shakes the existence and sense of belongingness of Yank, is contributed by several internal and external conflicting forces.

Yank is a deprived stoker in a capitalist society where the people are commodified- the value of people does not depend on their characteristics and humanitarian aspect; rather it depends on their productivity-how much price they can earn through their economic functional capabilities in terms of production. Hungarian Marxist philosopher George Lukacs' opinion regarding the connection between commodification and alienation is quite relevant here. In his famous work "History and Class Consciousness" (1923), used a term 'reification' that refers to the conversion of all aspects of human life-abstract or non-abstract- into 'things'. In a capitalist society, human life is fragmented; all the aspects of life are devoted to different works at different places to serve its own value and thus an individual persistently attempts to fit the world. The whole process demolishes the person as a whole through a mechanism that is machine. Gradually this intricate process also leads a person to alienation as Yank is in. He is alienated from all; even from his own class. The machine age has radically fragmented all the people into different classes making them alienated

and self-conscious that lead to again presence or absence of sense of belongingness. All these have contributed to the internal crisis of Yank.

If we consider the genre of "The Hairy Ape", we can identify the cunning adoption of expressionism, against the realism, by Eugene O'Neill. He adopted it to show the inner reality of Yank; what goes on within him. A deeper probing of sub-consciousness is artistically presented through a shift from external to internal reality. Yank is more conscious than his fellow mates. While they, Paddy and Long, think that they do not belong to anywhere; Yank strongly believes that "he belongs". The external world does not serve any cause to believe that he belongs but he feels internal strength that creates the sense of belongingness as if he is in a world of dream possessed by himself only.

At a certain point external reality becomes sub-conscious and Yank remains mere an abstraction. Several clicks of streams of consciousness show the disconnected features of psychological aspects of Yank that builds a strong illusionment of belongingness. But, Yank, being unaware of his base of existence, ultimately gets disillusioned several times in the play. In the first two scenes of the play, we can see that Yank is illusioned; but soon his disillusionment starts from the third scene. The first shake he gets is from Mildred Douglas, rich, anemic, and snobbish upper class girl, who addresses him as "the filthy beast". Yank feels insulted as he is illusioned of his pride of belongingness. Yank is truculent, careful of himself, fiercer than the similar class of people, powerful thinker, possessor of superior strength, and self-expressive. He is not ready to get disillusioned and to tolerate such an insult as it forces him to ask himself: does he belong anywhere? His obsession and self-confidence are shaken for the first time in third scene in a continuum where, at one extreme point is there his illusionment and disillusionment at the other end. Yank runs from one point to another, after he is shaken. He feels the extreme crisis of existence, "where do I get off-say, where do I go from here?". In scene three, there is a classic conflict between rich and poor. Yank, losing his faith in himself, suffers from spiritual loneliness, and

disintegration and finally find himself as a hairy ape, his predecessor. The other stokers, Paddy, Long and anonymous others, do not have individuality like Yank. Thus O'Neil mirrors only on Yank's internal spiritual crisis full of anger and anguish of his soul.

From the fourth scene, search for identity and quest of revenge dominate Yank's actions. As the other characters do not possess sense of belongingness, and individuality; the names of other characters are not given except of Paddy and Long. Perhaps, it is to centralize Yank's internal psychological crisis and to make it more vivid and focused. Scene four starts with a changed Yank who, unlike Paddy who is a dreamer and Long who wants to take revenge against the upper class by tool of voting, like an active proletariat, wants to take violent revenge- in his words, "*He believes in direct action, in taking personal revenge for the insult that has been heaped upon him*". It seems another form of illusionment and fear of loss of identity. Revenge will not, in fact it does not, guarantee his belongingness but Yank finds himself alive in doing so. "*And there was Yank roaring curses and turning round wid his shovel to brain her- and she looked at him, and him at her. She had seen a great hairy ape escaped from the Zoo*". Class conflict, inequality and injustice are not the main theme of the play; it is the psychological implications of the Machine age. The psychological anguish is more deteriorated by the contribution of class conflict, inequality, his sense of belongingness and revengeful attitude.

According to Winter, the main theme of the play is social alienation and search for identity as we see from the fourth scene to the last scene. Whatever the main theme is, Yank goes thorough psychological crisis of existence more. His crisis is internal but it is greatly contributed by the external crisis of the working people in the society. External crisis makes Yank internally degraded and dehumanized that leads him to the determination of extreme revenge as he finds himself as a gorilla-the hairy predecessor. Later, we find Yank to wink and talk to the women insultingly. How much illusioned he is. He finds pleasure in doing some meaningless, naive and childish nuisances to disturb the upper class of people on the street of Fifth Avenue but nothing of these eliminates his illusionment to seal

his existence. Perhaps he has great internal pressure for ensuring external existence and later he acted like a mad ape. He struggles persistently in his own way but, instead of securing his existence, he is caught and confined into to a prison on Blackwells Island. His anguish and emotional torture increase a lot and he remains heavy with the words 'hairy-ape'. In the prison, he, again, finds himself as if he is in a zoo and all are animals in their respective cages. Being in the prison, he expresses his strong determination to take revenge, "*But i'll get back at her, you watch! And if i can't find her I'll take it out on de gang she runs wit. I'm wise to where they hangs out now. I'll show her who belongs! I'll show her who's in de move and how ain't. You watch my smoke*". From this statement, it seems that he wants more to prove his belongingness, less to take revenge. The revenge he wants to take is for his internal anguish; not for his physiological suffering that he and his fellow mate go through relentlessly as an inferior part of the society. From his fellow hairy apes, he gets a suggestion to join the organization I.W. W. (Industrial Workers of the World). His sense of belongingness starts working again with the same illusionment with a hope to find his own world, own class where he belongs. The final stroke comes from the words of the president of I.W.W. The president addresses him as "brainless ape". Soon, he is disillusioned losing his last hope of dining out his own group and he understands that he does not belong to the IWW even. Here, the author uses interior monologue to show his consciousness, bewilderment, anguish, and extreme depression. In his words, "*I'm a busted ingersoll, dafs what. Steel was me, and I owned de wolid. Now I ain't "steel, and de woild owns me. Aw, hell! i can't see-if s all dark, get me? It's all wrong! Say, youse up dere, Man in the Moon youh, dat look so wise, gimmie da answer huh? Slip me de inside dope, de information right from de stable-where do I get get off at, huh?*" Some questions are never answered :Yank does not get any reply from anyone, from anywhere. He is bewildered what to do and stops on the road but policeman forces Yank to move off the road. He, then, asks him, "*Where do i go off from here?*". He gets more depressed with the answer he gets, "*To Hell*". Then he goes to the zoo

thinking that maybe he belongs to the monkey house of the zoo.

The last few words of Yank to a Gorilla is remarkable, " *Sure, I get yoh. Yuh challenge de whole woild huh? You got what I was sayin' even if ath muffed de woild. Any why wouldn't youh get me? Ain't we both members of de same culb-de Hairy Apes? So youh're what she seen when she looked at me, de white-faced tart! I was you to her, get me? On'y out a de cage-broke out – free to moider her, see?*" He finally finds his belongingness in the Hairy Ape and appeals to the hairy ape to break the cage and take revenge for him. Yank shares his determination to blow out the whole gang and unconsciously breaks the lock and addresses the gorilla as his brother. The gorilla comes out and instantly crushes him to death and Yank can understand that he misreads the Gorilla. He doesn't belong to the Hairy Ape as well. He utters his last words with deep agony, " *Chirst, where do I get off at? where do I fit in?*"

At the end of Yank's death, O'Neill has added his final comment : "He slips in a heap on the floor and dies. The monkeys set up a chattering, whimpering wail. And perhaps, the Hairy Ape at last belongs". Perhaps, he belongs to the hairy ape.

Bloom elucidates the play as the following:

"The story of *The Hairy Ape* is simple. Yank's position at the bottom of the social ladder and his opposition to those at the top are established in the first four scenes; in each subsequent scene, he attempts to find a place for himself in society. Unable to fit in anywhere, he ends up in the gorilla's cage at the zoo, where he dies alone." (Bloom, p 72)

The play represents the crises of Yank, in fact everybody of Yank's class, metaphorically. The purpose of the writer seems very clear: to show the absurdities of the industrial society and how the people suffer psychologically due to these absurdities. The machine age, thus, has made life a fragmented one and put human being into a chain where he hardly can make his/her own choice. Being fragmented part of the society, they can never escape from the materialistic objectivity of the complex structure of the society; rather they suffer both psychologically and physiologically. Yank

represents his class, his society where existence is threatened frequently by hundreds of internal and external factors. Perhaps, Yank could be a part of proletariat revolution but, as he is alone, most often violent and illogical and he was also partly responsible for his own destruction, he could not survive at the end of the day. But he is lucky that he is no more the part of meaningless life and he has unique individuality. He is unlucky being unable to fit himself anywhere, to overcome indeterminism of external reality. Has he finally resigned to fate? or to himself? -is an unresolved question. From one point of view, he resembles Foydor Dostoyevsky's Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov ("Rodya," "Rodka"), the central character of Crime and Punishment. Rodka tries to justify his crime that leads him ethical decay and personal destruction. Yank, also has his own logic for his determination to take revenge but it leads him ultimate personal destruction. Like Franz Kafka's protagonists, Yank is confined in a system, that he wants to wipe out, beyond his control; and he remains chained in an inherent terror of existence as he neither can change the system nor can digest it and existence remains a crisis.

The crises of Kuber is qualitatively different from that of Yank as they belong to two different societies, but there are few similarities between their courses of life. Kuber does not have sense of belongingness but he also goes through a crisis of existence-survival and the crisis of his internal biological instinct that makes him suffer. Manik Bandyopadhyay was a great fiction writer in the history of Bengali Literature. He was greatly inspired by Marxian and Freudian philosophy. Dr. Soroj Mohon Mitro, a famous critique of Manik from India, finds the shadow of Pavlov in the works of Manik. Kuber can be analysed by Freudian psychoanalysis for his illegal but subconscious lust for his sister in law- Kopila. It must be acknowledged that Marxian and Freudian philosophy are quite contrasting in nature. It seems that the two opposite characteristics has made Kuber's existence more vulnerable.

"The Padma Nadir Majhi" is a novel of crisis of rural people of nearby areas of the river Padma in Bangladesh and Kuber seems to be their representative as he surpasses the other characters.

Manik used to deal with the pettiness and wretchedness of lower class people in his different works. Padma Nadir Majhi, perhaps the most memorable one among all his works, is distinguished among those. Abu Hena Mostafa Kamal, a Bangladeshi critic, addresses Manik as the Second Boat Man of the River Padma. The first boat man was Rabindranath Tagore who also wrote on the people who lived near the river Padma. But Tagore wrote about the mystery of inner world of human mind; while Manik describes the reality of those people with a close and intimate eye. In his own words, Manik says, *"The main attraction of the book is not the brave picture of kuber's life; the best quality of the book does not lie in the realistic description of the life of boatmen and in the effective application of regional dialect. The old and unpolished humanity of general people, the never ending mental agony of illiterate, poverty stricken human and untamed collision of deepest lust, the attraction for unknown and uncertainty in a little and narrow circumference of life have been depicted flawlessly in "Padma Nadir Majhi" and these have earned acknowledgement as global literature for this novel "* But the crisis of the central character Kuber earns the centre of attraction and whatever happens in the story, mostly are centered around Kuber

Like Yank, Kuber represents the crisis of neighbors of his class. Kuber is not an idealistic; he is the boatman of the river Padma who has been defeated in the war of life. In his society, class division is severe; even there is division within the same class, the writer says, "Kuber is the poorest among the poor, the meanest among the means". Kuber belongs to a very lower class in his society. He does not have his own boat and he works under the boat owner Dhononjoy, the representative of opportunist. The owner cheats him and his fellow mates even in counting the number of fishes. The deprived boatmen get more deprived not getting the due wage. So, he, for the quest of survival, steals some fishes and sells it to Shitol but he also does not pay the money and increases the due. Kuber asks, "give me the money now, wont I eat? wont I feed my children?". The answer is negative. Kuber falls into more crisis- being unable to earn the livelihood

for his family members. The fate of other boatmen is not different. Eyes get heavier with drops of salty rain but Kuber, though he is strong enough, cannot protest as he has no right to be alive, no place to live, no food to eat and nowhere to go. He is chained like Yank in a social system that is beyond his control; he is deprived by all. The only desire and stress in life is to manage food. In such a severe crisis, life becomes unwelcomed, meaningless, unexpected and burden. But biological relationship continues and the cries of the children never stop. Kuber does not get happy hearing the news of arrival of his new family member, his son, as he knows that hunger is waiting for his child. Here, we can find the struggle between Kuber's conscious mind and subconscious biological impulse. He knows that birth is unwelcomed in his society but he cannot resist his intense desire of lust. He cannot overcome both his conscious mind that understands the reality and his subconscious instinct.

In the locality of Kuber, there is no religious crisis: no struggles with the religion. All the people of different religions live together; they can do it because religion is more aesthetic and less practical to them. Even, God does not exist in their locality as Manik says, *"God exists in the civil society"*. When there is no food to eat, God betrays the poor, life remains same for all at the end of the day and religion is mere a regularity. They have only two needs- hunger and lust and these two are the root sources of their crisis. kuber is not too much unethical but he has to yield to poverty. As a responsible father, for his future child, he has to steal coal from the rail company of Debiganj to manage the fire in the room where his wife is supposed to give birth his child. As it is, there is no chance to justify his action, whether right or wrong. He has his own logic to justify his wrong action as he is forced to do so being deprived of the minimum fundamental rights. Kuber is cleverer than the other boatmen but he lacks the power to protest any irregularity. He can understand that Hossain Mia is very cunning but he remains with him as he has no alternative choice. Kuber cannot avoid the ghost of colonialism, Hossain Mia; ultimately surrenders to him and agrees to escape to 'Moyna Dip'. The courses of actions that force Kuber to take

this self-destructing and suicidal decision are again related to intense desire to get rid of the crisis. He breaks his promises with Raashu and marries off his daughter to a better bride selected by Hossain Mia. That ignites Raashu and climax starts. Kuber is falsely accused of theft and there is no place for him where he can be safe. The only flaw Kuber has, as a lovable father, is the desire to see the better days in his daughter's life. It again proves that he has no right to live better and he should not dare to break the chain. It also proves that the poor, like Raashu, having a sense of deprivation and the psychological courage to take revenge, can be ferocious against his fellow class but can not do anything against the upper class represented by Hossain Mia centrally. The indomitable, fearless boatman of the ravenous Padma surrenders to his fate, to his society, to poverty. He departs stealthily, even without informing his family about his whereabouts as his existence is shaken and threatened.

Kuber, along with his physiological crisis, has also psychological crisis. His love and affection are always subdued by the external factors of the society and his lack of internal courage. He never dares to break the rule and norm of society and he does not accept Kopila. He hides his love for Kopila from himself and from whom he loves. His inner world tends to explode several times but it gets suppressed by the external forces. Neither can he express himself to Kopila accordingly, nor can he pacify his internal instability. Kuber cannot deceive Maala as well, nor he can ignore his love for Kopila. We do not see any unethical intimacy between Kopila and Kuber; but a suppressed desire to be united. The disability of Mala makes Kuber to ponder. The lust for Kopila forces him to ignore the society but he cannot do it. He finds peace in Kopila: the only girl who can reduce his instability for moments, can make him oblivious of everything-else of his world. But Kuber fears the society. This dilemma tops up his crisis and he suffers both internally and externally. For him, Kopila is an illusionment. Whenever he is in disturbance, he goes to her in search of peace. He is jealous of Shitol when he sees Kopila talking to him. He asks Kopila why she talks to Shitol too much. He is so conscious

and subconsciously possessive that he is not ready to tolerate anybody talking to Kopila even. Kuber does not fear the society only; he fears himself as well. He cannot come closer to Kopila even passing the whole night in the same room. The internal stress does not allow him to be united with Kopila. But throughout his struggle, physiological crisis does not exceed his psychological crisis. It is greatly because Kuber lives in a society where hunger is the bet sauce.

At the end of the story, we can see Kuber to agree to allow Kopila as a company in the journey to Moyna Dip. Though it is a great crisis in Kuber's life, perhaps, he will be happy with Kopila, except the tension of his family's whereabouts, in Moyna Dip where the need of survival and the extension of generation allow extramarital affair. Kuber knew that one day he will have to shift to Moyna Dip. When Kopila requests him not to go there he says, "*Hossain Mia will certainly take me to Moyna Dip in any way. He will put me in the jail again, even I surrender this time.*" The poor have no choice of their own and they have to yield to the human Lord always. Kuber has to be the residence of the would be colony generated by Hossain Mia, the lord, who can secure the crisis of existence of hundreds of people like Kuber. But there starts another crisis: struggling against nature, against wild animals, and against fate; earlier it was against Padma. The fate of confined lower class people does not seem to be in the hand of God; rather it is in the hand of upper class people who are God by themselves in a society where discrimination is practiced to an unlimited extent in different forms. What will happen to Kuber is not known but it can be predicted. Finally, like Yank, Kuber cannot reject the authority. Their raised and suppressed questions are not answered by any authority, nor by themselves. Both of them are greatly responsible for their consequences and termination from their own place. Yank is arrogant and lacks the ability to fit the world though he is stronger than others in all respects and Kuber is cunning, greedy and amorous immorally. Though he belongs to a community, he has failed to hold his belongingness.

Any belletristic approach is not ideal to analyze the crisis of Kuber and Yank. Materialistic

objective approach and subjective existentialist approach together can best explain the crisis of their existence. Existentialism greatly revolves around the absolute primacy of the conscious subject over everything while Marxism gives priority to nature over society and to society over an individual. The conflict between Subjective (internal) and the Objective (external) forces influence individual and individual's connections with the surrounding world. Sometimes individual suffers for his internal failure to change and fit the world; sometimes external forces crush the individual and intensifies his/her crisis.

Yank, unlike Kuber, lives in a more developed society that is much capitalistic and he is divorced internally and externally from his class, from his society and finally does not find himself anywhere to belong. Yank fails to fit his subjective reactions to the external world. He is supposed to have his own existence and own right to shape his existence but he fails being mis-judgmental and overweighed against external forces-Mildred's hatred, upper class's artificiality etc.-that ultimately lead him absolute disillusionment and belonginglessness. He, in no way, could be 'himself' at his own choice and pays the penalty with his life. His searches for identity, for dignity, for rights, and for the autonomy of his personality against the authority go in vain. As a part of the society, he, perhaps, must not have the desire to blow it out. Can anyone exist anywhere-else from the society? Isn't Yank the product of his society? Aren't all his attributes formed by the social contents of the surrounding world? Perhaps, he could survive if he sought the answers of these questions. Who would serve the answer! Kuber does not bother the internal crisis though it contributes to his failure to fit the surrounding that remains implicit. He is not divorced from his class or society, but his greed and immoral cunningness make him fail to fit his own world. This crisis of existence-failing to fit the external world and failing to settle the internal imbalance- is not unique; rather it is universal, it is the crisis of all living individuals of twentieth century in different forms and faces. It is within them, against themselves; it is beyond their control, against the anguishing alternatives and inevitable consequences.

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Reading books, watching Cricket, doing any social welfare work is his favorite pastime. He has also fascination in listening patriotic songs.