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Psychological Dislocation, Identity Crisis, and Humanistic Vision in the Fiction of Kunal Basu: A Postcolonial-Existential Inquiry

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Abstract
Identity and belonging have become increasingly complex in postcolonial and global contexts, where migration and displacement reshape individual and collective experiences. The fiction of Kunal Basu provides a nuanced exploration of these issues through characters who inhabit spaces of cultural uncertainty and psychological fragmentation. This paper examines how Basu represents identity as a dynamic and evolving process shaped by displacement, marginalisation, and historical memory. Focusing primarily on *Kalkatta*, the study argues that the reconstruction of self among migrants is marked by tension between assimilation and cultural retention. Drawing on postcolonial theory and existential thought, the paper demonstrates that Basu not only exposes the crisis of identity but also offers a humanistic perspective grounded in empathy, moral awareness, and resilience (Hall, 1990; Bhabha, 1994).

Keywords: Identity, Displacement, Diaspora, Selfhood, Marginalisation, Humanism

Introduction

Identity is not a fixed or stable entity; rather, it is continuously shaped and reshaped by social, cultural, and historical forces. In contexts of migration and displacement, this process becomes even more complex, often leading to a sense of fragmentation and uncertainty. As Stuart Hall (1990) argues, identity is not something we possess but something we construct within specific historical and cultural narratives.

For diasporic communities, identity formation involves negotiating between past and present, homeland and host land. This negotiation often produces what Homi K. Bhabha (1994) describes as a "third space," where identities are neither entirely original nor fully assimilated. Such in-betweenness becomes a defining feature of migrant experience.

In the fiction of Kunal Basu, this tension is vividly portrayed. His narratives do not simply depict migration as a physical movement but as a deeply psychological and existential process. Particularly in *Kolkata*, Basu explores how individuals attempt to reconstruct their identities while navigating social exclusion and cultural dislocation.

Identity Formation and Diasporic Self

Identity formation within diasporic contexts is inherently complex, as it involves both continuity

and change. Migrants often carry with them memories, traditions, and cultural practices from their homeland, yet they must adapt to new social realities in the host environment. This duality creates a fragmented sense of self.

In *Kalkatta*, the protagonist Jamshed Alam (Jami) embodies this tension. His desire to become a "Kalkattawallah" reflects a longing for acceptance and belonging. However, this aspiration also requires him to distance himself from his original identity, leading to an internal conflict. As scholars have noted, diasporic identity is often characterised by a constant process of negotiation rather than a stable sense of belonging (Brah, 1996; Clifford, 1994).

Jami's experience illustrates how identity can become performative, shaped by external expectations rather than internal coherence. His attempts to assimilate into the dominant culture reveal the pressures faced by marginalised individuals to conform in order to survive.

Psychological Dislocation and Crisis of Self

Displacement does not only involve physical relocation; it also disrupts the psychological and emotional foundations of identity. The loss of a familiar environment and social network often leads to a sense of alienation and instability.

In Basu's fiction, psychological dislocation is depicted through characters who struggle to reconcile their past with their present. Jami's journey in *Kalkatta* reflects this condition, as he oscillates between different roles and identities. His involvement in morally ambiguous activities can be understood as a response to the pressures of survival in an unfamiliar and often hostile environment.

This condition resonates with existential philosophy, particularly the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre (2003), who emphasizes that individuals must create meaning in a world that offers no inherent purpose. Similarly, Albert Camus (2005) highlights the absurdity of existence, where individuals must confront the tension between their search for meaning and the indifference of the world.

Marginalisation and Urban Exclusion

Urban spaces in Basu's fiction are not neutral settings but sites of power and inequality. Migrants and refugees often find themselves relegated to marginalised areas, where they experience social exclusion and economic hardship.

The depiction of Zakaria Street in *Kalkatta* reflects this reality, as also described in the IJNTI study (pp. 2–4). The area functions as a socio-cultural enclave where displaced communities attempt to recreate a sense of belonging. However, this spatial concentration also reinforces their marginalisation, as they remain separated from the dominant society.

Scholars have argued that urban marginality is closely linked to issues of identity and belonging, as marginalised communities are often denied access to resources and opportunities (Jodhka, 2012; Harvey, 2008). Basu's portrayal of such spaces highlights the structural inequalities that shape the experiences of migrants.

Religion, Culture, and Identity Conflict

Religion and cultural practices play a significant role in shaping identity, particularly for displaced communities. In *Kolkata*, the Muslim identity of the characters becomes both a source of solidarity and a marker of difference.

The character of Miri represents an alternative approach to identity formation. While Jami seeks

assimilation, Miri turns towards religious identity as a means of stability and self-definition. Her choice reflects the importance of cultural continuity in maintaining a sense of self.

However, this also raises questions about the relationship between tradition and modernity. As Edward Said (1978) argues, cultural identities are often shaped by power relations, where certain identities are privileged while others are marginalised.

Existential Struggle and Moral Ambiguity

Basu's fiction is marked by a deep engagement with moral ambiguity. His characters often find themselves in situations where conventional notions of right and wrong are blurred.

Jami's choices reflect the complexity of ethical decision-making in contexts of marginalisation. His actions cannot be understood in isolation but must be viewed within the socio-economic conditions that shape his life.

Existential philosophy provides a useful framework for understanding this complexity. According to Sartre (2003), individuals are responsible for their choices, even when those choices are made under constraint. This emphasis on responsibility highlights the ethical dimension of Basu's narratives.

Humanistic Vision and Possibility of Redemption

Despite the challenges faced by his characters, Basu's fiction ultimately affirms the possibility of human connection and ethical transformation. His narratives suggest that identity is not solely determined by external factors but can be redefined through relationships and moral awareness.

The bond between Jami and Pablo, for instance, introduces a dimension of empathy and emotional depth that transcends social divisions. Such moments of connection highlight the resilience of the human spirit and the potential for redemption.

This humanistic perspective aligns with broader philosophical traditions that emphasise the importance of compassion and ethical responsibility in shaping human experience (Sen, 2006; Bauman, 2000).

Discussion

The present study demonstrates that the fiction of Kunal Basu offers a multidimensional exploration of identity that transcends conventional postcolonial narratives. Rather than presenting identity as a fixed cultural inheritance, Basu portrays it as a fluid, negotiated, and often fractured construct, shaped by historical displacement, socio-economic marginalisation, and psychological conflict.

One of the key findings of this study is that Basu's representation of identity aligns closely with the postcolonial understanding of hybridity and liminality. As Homi K. Bhabha (1994) argues, identity emerges within a "third space" where cultural meanings are constantly redefined. Jami's struggle in *Kalkatta* reflects this condition of in-betweenness, where he is neither fully rooted in his past nor fully accepted in the present. This reinforces the idea that diasporic identity is not about achieving stability but about navigating continuous transformation (Hall, 1990).

Furthermore, the study reveals that Basu's fiction foregrounds the psychological consequences of displacement, an aspect often underexplored in traditional postcolonial criticism. Jami's internal fragmentation, emotional instability, and moral ambiguity illustrate how displacement disrupts not only social belonging but also the coherence of the self. This finding resonates with existential thought, particularly the notion that individuals must construct meaning in uncertain and often hostile

environments (Sartre, 2003; Camus, 2005).

Another significant insight is the role of urban space as a site of exclusion and identity **formation**. The depiction of Zakaria Street as a marginalised enclave highlights how spatial segregation reinforces social hierarchies. As noted in the IJNTI study, such spaces function both as shelters and as markers of exclusion, creating a paradox where belonging is achieved only within the boundaries of marginalisation. This observation aligns with broader sociological analyses of urban inequality, where access to space is closely linked to power and identity (Harvey, 2008; Jodhka, 2012).

The study also highlights the contrasting approaches to identity formation represented by Jami and Miri. While Jami seeks assimilation into the dominant culture, Miri turns towards religious identity as a source of stability. This contrast underscores the multiplicity of responses to displacement, suggesting that identity reconstruction is not a uniform process but varies according to individual choices and socio-cultural contexts. In this regard, Basu's fiction challenges simplistic binaries of tradition versus modernity, instead presenting identity as a complex interplay of both (Said, 1978).

Importantly, the findings suggest that Basu's narratives move beyond mere representation of crisis to offer a humanistic perspective on identity and belonging. Through moments of empathy and emotional connection, particularly in Jami's relationship with Pablo, Basu emphasises the possibility of ethical transformation. This aligns with humanistic theories that foreground compassion and moral responsibility as essential to human existence (Sen, 2006; Bauman, 2000).

In comparison with other contemporary Indian English novelists, Basu's work stands out for its integration of psychological realism with philosophical inquiry. While writers such as Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie often emphasise historical and political dimensions of displacement, Basu places greater emphasis on the inner lives of his characters, thereby offering a more intimate exploration of identity and belonging.

Overall, this discussion highlights that Basu's fiction contributes significantly to contemporary literary discourse by:

- Expanding postcolonial studies to include psychological and existential dimensions
- Challenging fixed notions of identity and belonging
- Emphasising the ethical and humanistic possibilities within conditions of displacement

Thus, Basu's work not only reflects the realities of a globalised world but also provides a deeper understanding of the human condition in contexts of uncertainty, fragmentation, and change.

Conclusion

The fiction of Kunal Basu offers a profound exploration of identity, displacement, and human resilience. By portraying characters who navigate complex social and psychological landscapes, Basu highlights the challenges of belonging in a fragmented world.

At the same time, his narratives suggest that identity is not a fixed essence but a continuous process of negotiation and transformation. Through a humanistic lens, Basu emphasises the importance of empathy, moral awareness, and human connection in overcoming the challenges of displacement.

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