

*“My hands felt just like two balloons”*: the conflict between Mind and Body in Sartre’s *Nausea*.

Mohul Bhattacharya

**Abstract:** In this paper I would try to explore how Jean Paul Sartre in his novel, *Nausea*, describes the daily life of an existential protagonist, Antoine Roquentin. Existential literature has in general pointed out how a man is hyperaware of his existence, this inevitably leads to fixation, obsession, and ultimately disrupts his daily normative and conformist duties towards a society. Sartre talks about the perils of a post-modern society in this autobiographical novel, and the similarities to today’s neo-modern capitalist society are uncanny. The urban illness with body image and isolation of the self and creation of a big Other was pointed out by Jacques Lacan, I would try to examine if the social alienation of a man and his identity are only psychologically individual or does a social setting affect their existential state.

**Keywords:** body dysmorphia, existentialism, alienation, the big Other, symbolic self.

Jean Paul Sartre, in his existential novel *Nausea*, writes of a phenomenology where the body of his protagonist has an identity of its own, almost a dual narrative where his actions among the crowd is distorted. *Nausea*, written during Sartre’s stay in the town Le Havre of France as a teacher has the same flavours of duality and mental fragmentation which are not essentially physical in nature. The protagonist starts his diary with, “Something has happened to me: I can’t doubt that any more.” (Sartre 5) This shows us the first steps of a common man

turning and facing the big Other which is a presupposition, which will not exist unless acted upon(2). Antoine Roquentin is a historian, he has never faced “psychological analysis”, and he implores himself of any “self knowledge” he has so he can understand what exactly is happening to him. This is not however exclusive to him because he is a historian. People in seclusion do not function normally. Though philosophies like stoicism are attractive to read, you can rarely function so freely. Freedom has its limits. Sartre in this diary novel deliberately keeps the entries short and from the beginning. Showing us exactly how the “nausea” starts and how the man in the eye of the storm deals with it. Roquentin is also not satisfied with his conditions. There is a deep longing for “Anny”. We don’t see this relationship go further than expected. Roquentin when visiting his ex-girlfriend Anny finds he has no real connection left to her. She also does not understand his Nausea, it is natural she would not. The obsession Roquentin experiences are very individualistic. Existential novels are not moral compasses, never had been. In his essay collective *Myth of Sisyphus and other Essays* Camus talks about ‘Philosophical Suicide’:

*To say that, that climate is deadly scarcely amounts to playing on words. Living under that stifling sky forces one to get away or to stay. The important thing is to find out how people get away in the first case and why people stay in the second case. This is how I define the problem of suicide and the possible interest in the conclusions of existential philosophy. (Camus 23)*

“I stopped short because I felt in my hand a cold object which attracted my attention by means of a sort of personality. I opened my hand and looked: I was simply holding the doorknob.” ( Sartre 5) The dissociation and the breakaway of the mind from physical dimensions of a person is what post-modern writings brought into the literary spheres. The world had faced two devastating wars on unprecedented scales in human history. The usual currencies of human societies were not working, religion seemed farfetched and money was either abundant or so scarce people feared it. Philosophers and authors alike turned to the only available source of

introspections. The shift was so rapid from the Eurocentric cultural and society, periods of modernism and post-modernism were a retaliation on the Self just to locate an entire culture. Roquentin is not the first existential protagonist, ‘Gregor Samsa’, ‘Raskolnikov’ have all faced the inexplicable turmoil of what would the world mean if they had not been what they were. During the 1930’s Sigmund Freud encountered a patient who was nicknamed the ‘Wolf Man’; such was his obsession with his own nose, he would powder it every other minute, carry a mirror and frequently look into it.

*It might appear at first glance that there are two distinct bodies under consideration, but this is manifestly not the case. A human being neither "has" nor "is" two bodies; the body as it is lived and the body as it appears in objective observation are one and the same body. The lived body is the physiological body. (Gallagher 140)*

The physiological act of nausea surpluses us with overwhelming emotions but Sartre is not concerned about crass emotions involving everyday routines. The protagonist is a historian and an accomplished one at that who keeps reading quirky historical figures like “Monsieur de Rollebon” for the last ten years of his life. Just because he had read Rollebon had stayed in Bouvelli, Roquentin moves to this town. Day after day he not only loses interest in this historical figure, he also starts seeing this figure in his own reflection. Simple acts of drinking in a pub and the sound of shuffling cards suddenly makes Roquentin exclaim the ‘Nausea’ is back. “Then the Nausea seized me.” (Sartre 23) When talking of a body separately from the entity we often talk of extravagant processes just to explain panic attacks or nervous breakdowns. This is not the same. Roquentin functions as he is expected, none of the patrons of the pub see him differently, just like Meursault is not seen differently after his mother’s death, in *The Stranger*. It is only

when questioned that people project their own beliefs into the big Other, explaining how the man is not quite right.

Jacques Lacan, after being expelled from the IPA (International Psychoanalytical Association) felt the need to ‘return to Freud’ as essential and important because he felt Freud had been grossly misrepresented, misinterpreted. Lacan being controversial and contrasting between structural and post-modern talked about the Real, Imaginary, and the Symbolic. In *Nausea* we see the Symbolic developing inside the lonely history academic, so profuse is the sensation it is capitalized almost always. “A little more and I would have fallen into the mirror trap” (Sartre 37). Slavoj Žižek in explaining how to read Lacan gives an excellent example in the form of a joke where a man is stranded on an island with Cindy Crawford. After having sex with her, he very politely asks her if she could pretend to be his best friend, reassuring her it’s not some perversion. Once she has put on the disguise, the man nudges Crawford on the rib and says he just had sex with Cindy Crawford. This intense need to share one’s sexual activity is the big Other. Roquentin faces this overwhelm where his head seems placed on his shoulders and the slightest movement would decapitate him. Roquentin is at the same time facing this truth and running from it. He does not want to be complacent and give in. But his solitude is also not letting him get rid of this big Other.

This brings us to the illness named Body Dysmorphic Disorder. First coined in 1891 by an Italian psychiatrist, Enrico Morselli, body dysmorphic disorder is a condition where an individual is fixated on a deformity on one’s own body. Morselli wrote in his paper:

*The first condition consists of the sudden appearance and fixation in the consciousness of the idea of one’s own deformity; the individual fears that he has become deformed (dysmorphos) or might become deformed, and experiences at this thought a feeling of an inexpressible disaster... The ideas of being ugly are not, in*

*themselves, morbid; in fact, they occur to many people in perfect mental health, awakening however only the emotions normally felt when this possibility is contemplated.*

This fear of a deformity is present in Roquentin and is portrayed to us time after time as the protagonist avoids the mirror and calls it a ‘trap’, once he looks into the mirror he is hyper focused overtly critical of his facial features and calls himself “ugly”. “I can understand nothing about this face. Other people’s faces have some significance. Not mine.” He goes on to say, “I think it is ugly, because I have been told so.” His body is as important to him as others think it is. It is an idea, merely existing only when there’s an ‘other’ present there.

BDD is not a new condition but has been prevalent since the dawn of the classical literature, claiming references in Herodotus’ writing of Therapne where a nurse would visit daily to pray for Hera to “free a girl from her ugliness”. Plato talks of the same Theory of forms which is ultimately a struggle between the Real and the Ideal. He explains how a common man is trapped in a cave unable to see the Ideal form. A torch is lit behind the man and in between is a parapet where a puppeteer shows him forms. The big Other here being the puppeteer whose absence would mean absence of forms. Existential protagonists often lack forms. Under the psychoanalytical lens the characters become what would be termed unstable, often self harming and counterintuitive. BDD is a logical conclusion to such a hero who is at best unsure of their own body. “They are glassy, soft, blind, and red-rimmed; anyone would think they were fish scales.” This is the description Roquentin gives when writing about his eyes.

Neo-modern societies today are severly consumerist in nature, from social media to the food we eat, clothes we wear, or even the entertainment we enjoy. Today’s world has people with severe body image issues, surgery addicts, and people facing dysmorphia and fear of their own bodies. Existential dread is not new, but neither is it old and outdated. Authors like Albert

Camus, Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, or Sartre are relevant to the masses because we have lost our hierarchy among ourselves. There is no power dynamic when the introspective mind starts finding flaws within itself. Roquentin and the likes of him are present in people in almost all metropolises. Rene Descartes(1596-1690) argued that the nature of the mind and the body could exist independently and has almost an individual will of their own(2). Though Descartes had argued that the body and the mind are different, independent, saying as much as “I think, therefore I am” in the Discourse of Method (1637), the body is not independent of the mind, neither is the other way around. Arrival of newer theories like eco-criticism only ensures our doubts about a shift from the individualistic to the communal. The search for identity is a perpetual cascade of overwhelming nausea overshadowing the sense of belonging. Since the perpetuation of existential philosophies from the likes of Søren Kierkegaard we have seen an out of body experience which is not the usual, it is essentially absurd. There are definitive identities which play with our minds and sometimes those identities are too real to suppress. Fear is the oldest instinct among humans. Be it an existential protagonist or a tragic hero in crises. Still “One must imagine Sisyphus happy”(3).

## Notes

1. Comfortably Numb, a song by the Progressive rock band Pink Floyd talks of this dissociative feeling with one's body. This song, similar to BDD shows us the problems and issues of the fear of one's existence.

2. In the essay 'How to read Lacan' Slavoj Zizek talks of the introduction of Lacan and the Symbolic, from Lacan's lecture series book 1.
3. Albert Camus talks of the myth of Sisyphus. The unbearable weight of being and philosophical critique of existence of an individual in a perpetual loop of crises.

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