The Indian-American Immigrant: The Hyphenated Alien - A Study of Sunil Gangopadhyay's Novel *Purbo-Paschim (Vol II)*

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Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenon of Indian-American diasporic identity formation, as represented in Bengali novelist Sunil Gangopadhyay's Bengali novel Purbo-Paschim. Responses to the experience of migration to America from India have found varied portrayals in the works of Indian-American writers. However, a Calcutta based Bengali writer's delving into this issue is a rarity. Critical conversations around Gangopadhyay's works also have not probed his representation of this aspect. This study focuses on Gangopadhyay's depiction of the Indian-American diasporic experience in Purbo-Paschim through the character of Atin, and Atin's eventual epitomization of the lack of a stable identity of the diasporic subject.

Keywords: diaspora, Indian-American, hyphenated identity, *world literature, migration.*

1 Introduction

This paper examines the experience of cross-cultural migration from India to America and its associated process of Indian-American diasporic identity formation, as represented in the second volume of Bengali novelist Sunil Gangopadhyay's Bengali novel *Purbo-Paschim* (East-West). Responses to the experience of migration to America from India have found variedly nuanced portrayals in the works of Indian-American writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. However, a Calcutta based Bengali writer like Sunil Gangopadhyay's delving into this issue in a Bengali novel is an interesting rarity. Writer and poet Sunil Gangopadhyay[1] was one of the stalwarts of modern Bengali literature; he as, Suhrid Chattopadhyay writes, "for […] four decades […] strode like a colossus the cultural domain of Bengal on both sides of the international border, impacting various aspects of the arts - poetry, novel, short story, children's fiction, drama, travelogue" (Chattopadhyay 2012). Sunil Gangopadhyay had stayed in the United States of America in 1963-64 on a scholarship to attend the Iowa Writers' Workshop. As he states in his autobiography *Ardhek Jibon [Half a Life],* he was faced with the "serious crisis" (Gangopadhyay 2002: 262) of deciding between staying in the USA which offered the prospect of a well-paid job as a librarian at the Iowa University, and returning to Calcutta with economic uncertainty as well as the possibility of never regaining his place amidst his circle of friends. Although the job at the Iowa University library would have provided him the opportunity to pursue further studies as well as engage in writing, Gangopadhyay mentions linguistic alienation in America and his need to be in a Bengali speaking ethos to write in Bengali, as the deciding factor for his choice of returning to Calcutta (Gangopadhyay 2002: 262-267).This life event may have prompted Sunil Gangopadhyay to explore the question of diasporic subject position through his character Atin Majumder in *Purbo-Paschim Vol II*.

2 Literary Analysis

Sunil Gangopadhyay presents a nuanced and complex trajectory of the immigrant experience, marked by distinct, layered, and even contradictory phases. In his first phase as an immigrant in America, a young Atin in his early twenties perceives migration to America as a process of alienation and exile. What he can receive in the new world is completely overshadowed by the pains of what has been lost by leaving home. For him, immigration to America in this phase is a continuous struggle for survival in an alien universe. His sense of dislocation from his own space and alienation in the new space is accentuated by his stubborn refusal to adapt to life in America. Instead of acknowledging the positives that America brings to him, Atin is highly sceptical of his new world as is reflected in his pervasive criticism of American practices. Gangopadhyay highlights this through several instances in the text. For instance, in his initial days in New York, Atin works in a job of loading and unloading goods in a supermarket, and defiantly responds to queries about his occupation as "I am a coolie" (Gangopadhyay 1989: 102)[5]; when told by Bengali expatriate acquaintances that it is commonplace for youngsters to work in such jobs in America as Americans believe in dignity of labour, he vehement responds - "what is dignity of labour; in this country one cannot survive even a day without money, and hence, people are compelled to take up such jobs. There is absolutely no dignity of labour in being educated and working as a coolie or a servant" (Gangopadhyay 1989: 102).

Atin perceives his initial years in America as a painful exile from what is his own. According to Edward Said, exile is "solitude outside the group; the deprivations felt at not being with others" (Said 2000: 177). For Atin living in America is, however, not being in exile only psychologically or socially; it is in fact literal, a denouement of political circumstances. Atin had been compelled to immigrate to America to escape punishment for the criminal offence of murder he had committed as a Naxalite. Michael Gillespie states, "[...] the reality at the heart of the matter is that exile is thrust upon individuals who can no longer sustain themselves in the land that they have considered their homes" (Gillespie 2015: 5). According to Bill Ashcroft et al., the word exile indicates, "the state of being sent to another country that is not your own, especially for political reasons, or as a punishment" (Ashcroft et al. 1998: 86). Further, the merciless massacre of the Naxalites back home nullifies Atin's possibilities of returning to Calcutta. Depicting the horrifying situation of the Naxalites in the early 1970s, Jawhar Sircar writes:

> S.S. Ray's government had decided to use some army regiments to assist civil police in "exterminating the Naxalite menace". As General JFR Jacob of the Eastern Command confessed later on, sections of the army joined hands with the local police to hunt down Naxalites — in what was branded as Operation Steeple Chase […] the Naxalites were then shot in cold blood, often tied to lampposts, or at their very own doorsteps. Some were arrested and taken in police vans and many never seen ever again. Stories were rife of how these police vans stopped in the middle of nowhere, late in the night. The police opened the doors of the vans, freed the arrested Naxalites and told them to run away. But as soon as they did so, they were shot dead in the back. The official story was that they were escaping from police custody.
>
> (Sircar 2021)

In the novel, Atin's friend in New York, Siddhartha, corroborates such persecution of the Naxalites. He tells Atin:

> I read in the tabloid *India Abroad* that Siddhartha Ray's government has adopted a new tactic. They are not sending the Naxalites to the court. The Naxalites are being taken in police vans to the Maidan, where they are being released and told to run away. The moment they start running away, they are shot dead from behind. This process has been termed as an encounter […] You are lucky to have escaped from the country at the right time; if you were in jail now, you would not have survived.
>
> (Gangopadhyay 1989: 24)

Atin is thus subjected to a state of two-fold exile—psychological due to his difficulty and resistance to relate to the new milieu of America, as well as literal, caused by the political circumstances of his homeland.

The perception of exile can be equated with the sense of alienation. This state of double exile and alienation is intensified in Atin's case both due to his own response of resisting adaptation to his new world, and the circumstances specific to him as an escaped Naxalite. Often for immigrants the only source of solace in an alien land becomes their circle of immigrant friends who share the same origin. Jhumpa Lahiri, in her novel *The Namesake*, presents such an immigrant situation:

> They all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends […] The families drop by one another's home unexpected on Sunday afternoons. They drink tea with sugar and evaporated milk and eat shrimp cutlets fried in saucepans. They sit in circles on the floor, singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore […] They argue riotously over the films of Ritwik Ghatak versus those of Satyajit Ray. The CPIM versus the Congress party, North Calcutta versus the South. For hours they argue about politics of America, a country in which none of them is eligible to vote.
>
> (Lahiri 2003: 38)

However, Atin is in sharp contrast to the Bengali immigrants portrayed in *The Namesake*, who seem to huddle together to form a little island of Calcutta in the vast foreign land. On the one hand, Atin vehemently refuses to assimilate with the expatriate Bengali group familiar to his friend Siddhartha. This is evident in the scene where on the way back from one weekend Bengali gathering, a Bengali graduate student Nita questions Atin's demeanour, "You are too proud, aren't you? The way you were looking at all of us, it seemed to me that we were all fools and you were the only intelligent person" (Gangopadhyay 1989: 49). She further accuses, "He had no right to insult Santa Boudi; such a nice lady … he created a farce in the name of eating and left the room while Santa Boudi was singing. Who does that!" (Gangopadhyay 1989: 50). On the other hand, Atin is compelled to distance himself from unknown Bengalis to avoid the risk of his affiliation to the Naxal movement being exposed and his life being endangered, because in New York, which houses a substantial Bengali population, the kin of those killed by the Naxalites back home may well seek revenge. In fact, Siddhartha advises him to move to the mid-West, Arizona or New Mexico, regions which, unlike New York, have a negligible Bengali population, and thus minimise his life risk. Atin, in the first phase of his immigrant life in America, therefore remains an alienated self, who finds no means to alleviate his suffering caused by what Said terms as, "the loss of native hearth and homeland" (Said 2000: 178).

Ralph J. Crane and Radhika Mohanram argue that the trauma of migration involves a physical wrenching from home, language, nation, and the very sense of identity. In their opinion, migration from home, language, familiar landscape, and culture is necessarily

experienced as loss and pain (Crane and Mohanram 2000: ix). Atin initially seems to embody this sense of loss. He feels helplessly trapped in America and suffers from what C. Vijayasree terms as "anxiety arising from a sense of weightlessness, a lack of safe anchorage" in a foreign land (Vijayasree 2000: 126). This leads him to even attempt suicide by jumping off a moving car. At this stage of his existence in America, Atin is not shown to appreciate, even in the very least, the fact that America grants him the freedom and safety, which were jeopardized in India, and further offers the prospect of re-fashioning his future, while as a Naxalite the future that awaited him in India was imprisonment and brutal torture or death. Instead, Atin is psychologically plagued by a deep sense of guilt of betraying the Naxalite ideology and his Naxalite friends by escaping into the safe zone of capitalist America, while back home in West Bengal, the Naxalites continue to face extreme dangers. He is terrified by any news of Naxalite deaths, wondering if his closest friends and comrades Kaushik or Manik-da are dead. A trope common in Bengali Naxalite narratives is a Naxalite betraying fellow Naxalites by leaking secret information to the police, and in exchange, securing his passage to a foreign land at the cost of their lives. Among other several other works, this trope is projected in Bani Basu's [6] novel *Antarghat* through the character of Sumanta Sengupta, and in the movie *Meghnadbadh Rashaya* [7] through the figure of Ashimava Bose. Unlike Sumanta and Ashimava, Atin has not literally betrayed anyone or anything associated with the movement. His sense of betrayal stems from his abandonment of the Naxalite cause and his Naxalite friends and seeking safety in a capitalist country in a stark departure from the ideology of the movement. In fact, it is this guilt of betrayal that predominantly conditions Atin's stubborn refusal to adapt to American life, assimilate with the expatriate Bengali community, and appreciate the possibilities America holds for him.

Atin's sense of displacement, desperate longing for the world left behind, and guilt of abandoning his political ideology and Naxalite friends is poignantly reflected in the text as he is shown to internalise and thus subconsciously frequently hum the folk song that he one day hears his roommate singing. A song that epitomises the absolute alienation of the individual from the space they inhabit, "You Go Back to land of the Red Hills/the land of the Red Soil/you do not suit this place/do not suit it at all" (Gangopadhyay 1989: 251); the "at all" or absolutely encapsulating Atin's desperation as well as his guilt. The narrative further emphasises Atin's acute sense of displacement and desperation by showcasing his irrational determination to abandon the space of safety and prospects - America and return to the very space of life threat - India, which he has succeeded in escaping, once he is able to save enough for his passage money. Atin is even prepared to relinquish prospects of future professional success by quitting the doctoral program at Boston University, if the money is procured prior to his finishing the degree. Sunil Gangopadhyay's depiction of Atin in this first phase of his immigrant life in America seems to approximate a subject position that Sara Ahmed conceptualises as the "melancholic migrant" (Ahmed 2010).[8] According to Ahmed, a melancholic migrant is one who cannot dissociate himself/herself from the past of their country of origin, and therefore becomes a veritable cause of concern for the host country in terms of non-assimilation with its ethos. Atin can be regarded as a melancholic migrant as, in his initial months in New York and even in his later years in graduate school, he fails to extricate himself from his Naxalite Indian past and embrace his American present of safety and the promise of future success in America.

Purbo-Paschim Vol II depicts the second phase of Atin's immigrant life in America as that of the "melancholic migrant" beginning to accept the foreign land as his inevitable destination and thereby initiating the process of acculturation. Sunil Gangopadhyay presents Atin's romantic relationship with a fellow Bengali graduate student, Sharmila, as the catalyst

to the change in Atin's stance from defiant resistance to American life to accepting America as his present reality. The narrative portrays Sharmila as a character who adheres to the American concept of individual freedom of choice, over traditional Indian mores, which advocate strict regulation of women's sexuality within the institution of marriage. This is evident in that her romantic relationship with Atin in America entails physical intimacy, resulting in pregnancy outside of marriage, which is considered as a lack of propriety according to traditional Indian norms. Sharmila functions as an enabler of safety and rationality for Atin by convincing him to embrace America with its security and prospects over India, where, although by the mid-nineteen seventies the Naxalite movement had ended in failure, anyone who had been associated with the movement was still under life threat. She succeeds in persuading a reluctant Atin to accept the job offer and remain in America post his Ph.D., when Atin grows increasingly despondent at the thought of accepting the job, since it would mean the nullification of his decision of returning to India after obtaining his degree.

In narratives portraying the Indian-American diasporic experience, driving is often projected as a marker of Indian immigrants beginning the process of assimilation into American life. This trope is prominent in Bharati Mukherjee's and Jhumpa Lahiri's works- specific examples being Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Desirable Daughters* and Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "Mrs Sen". In *Desirable Daughters* the protagonist Tara's acquiring the ability to drive serves as a declaration of her successful embracing of America; Lahiri's character Mrs. Sen, however, fails to drive, which indicates her perpetually remaining alienated in America. We see the use of this trope in *Purbo-Paschim Vol II* as well as an indicator of Atin's gradual acceptance of America as his space, in the second phase of his immigrant life, as against his presence as an outsider in discord with America in the first phase. Atin refuses to purchase a car when he is a graduate student, even if that requires walking or cycling in the Boston snow. But he makes this concession for Sharmila, despite having to repeatedly justify to his own conscience that this purchase is not a frivolous indulgence in American excess but is an essentiality of his professional life. Atin's choice of Sharmila, in America, over Oli, his love interest in Calcutta, functions in the text as symbolic of his choice of America over India; this is poignantly depicted in a scene, which plays out in Atin's mind, where Bablu (Atin's pet name) of Calcutta confronts Atin of America.

> The shadow answered I am Bablu of Kolkata. Pratap Majumder's son. You are Atin of America; don't you recognize me? Atin answers, why will I not recognize you. I haven't forgotten anything […]
> [Bablu]: Oli? Who is Oli? Your father's friend's daughter; a mere acquaintance isn't it? […]
> [Atin]: Oli is my friend; she will remain my friend […] Have I ever told her that I will marry her? No […] Our friendship from our childhood days will remain!
> [Bablu]: Does one need to articulate such things? […] Oli discontinued private tuitions with a music teacher and an English professor only because you insisted. And what about when the two of you were travelling from Memary to Krishnanagar? On the banks of the Ganga in the evening, after crossing the ferry, and again later on the rickshaw, what did you tell Oli, Atin?
> [Atin]: Bablu, let go […]
> [Bablu]: That means you don't want to remember Oli anymore.
> [Atin]: Get lost Bablu.
>
> (Gangopadhyay 1989: 317)

For Oli America emerges as a signifier of the alien space that deprives her of a seminal aspect of her life - her lover Atin, and which she abandons in the midst of her very first semester in graduate school after becoming aware of Atin's betrayal. In an orthogonal trajectory, Sharmila is able to transform the alien space into her own by successfully carving out a niche for herself in America, personally as well as professionally. Sharmila's pregnancy and Atin's decision to marry her and remain in America signify in the novel his creating a world for himself in America, which excludes forever those that tie him back to his homeland - his parents and friends in Calcutta. His parents are shocked and hurt as he merely conveys the news of his marriage in a letter. Moralists as they are, Atin's closest friend and fellow Naxalites Kaushik and his wife Pompom never approve of his marriage to Sharmila, betraying Oli. Atin's relationship with Sharmila, in the second phase of his journey as an immigrant, thus translates the experience of migrating to America, which Atin with a sense of guilt had earlier perceived as alienation and a painful severing from his roots, into a rite of passage to freedom, safety, and better materialist prospects. Nevertheless, even at the point in the narrative when Atin decides to settle in America, Atin's choice of America over India, unlike that of the Indian-American immigrants in the works of Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Divakaruni, is not an unqualified choice of the space that offers freedom and materialist prospects over the other which essentially limits him. Sunil Gangopadhyay illustrates its layered nature in that his immigrant character Atin, despite having lived in America for a while by the time of the decision, still perceives America as foreign land. He embraces the safety it offers him solely for the sake of the child to be born, with the hope that one day his child will be able accomplish what he cannot - return to his own country/ his "desh" - a hope that no first generation Indian-American immigrant character of Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri or Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is shown to nurture, "Atin cried out 'whether it is a son or a daughter, he/she will never have any restrictions on returning to India. No matter what happens to me, our child will grow up, return to our country and will create a happy, healthy life there. I will live through him/her" (Gangopadhyay 1989: 517).

If the second phase of Atin's immigrant life is a nuanced illustration of the immigrant beginning to embrace his new world, the third phase depicts the highly complicated and conflicted subject position of the hyphenated Indian-American immigrant. In "Dissemi-Nation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," Homi Bhabha contends that the nation's margins, to which diaspora and other minority communities are relegated, are highly complex and flexible recesses of cultural production from where various oppositional practices and analytic capacities can emerge (Bhabha 1992: 310-11). This complexity and flexibility are exemplified in Gangopadhyay's portrayal of a forty-one-year-old Atin in the final section of the novel. In this third phase, Atin apparently seems to have successfully remodelled his life in accordance to demands of the new space of America, and in the process discarded, without any guilt, what acted as impediments to his assimilation in the new milieu - his ideology and his attachment to his parents and friends in India. Yet, Atin's saga of successful pursuit of the American Dream reveals beneath the layer of success the figure of the India-American immigrant consumed by the discontent of eternally lingering in the liminal space of his hyphenated identity, unable to fully belong to either side of the hyphen.

The third phase of Atin's journey as an immigrant pans out in the novel predominantly through four scenarios. His conversation with Siddhartha on his way to the New York airport, his moments of reflection in aloneness at the New York airport while he awaits the flight to Denver, at the Denver airport, and finally at the hotel in Denver. In the conversation with Siddhartha, Atin seems to have completely amalgamated into his adopted world and is

dismissive of any reflection of what is lost by leaving India as irrational nostalgia. Therefore, to Atin, Siddhartha's angst of being circumscribed by a life of relentless pursuit of materialistic pleasures in America, and the thought of once more attempting to settle back in India are "cheap sentiment" (Gangopadhyay 1989: 539); Atin thus sarcastically replies to Siddhartha:

> How much did you drink last night? It seems you are still not out of the hangover. Have you forgotten what happened last time? You will indulge in that foolishness once more.
> (Gangopadhyay 1989: 538)

Sunil Gangopadhyay projects Atin's disdainful dismissiveness through the Bengali slangs he uses to refer to alcohol and drinking.

Through Atin's musings at the New York airport, Gangopadhyay reveals that the key to his immigrant character's seamless acculturation into American life has been Atin's as well as Siddhartha's failed ventures of settling back in Calcutta with their families, once with the change of government in West Bengal the Naxalites were absolved of all charges against them. Atin ascribes this failure to the dearth of opportunities for professional growth caused by the lack of work ethic, and an overall compromised quality of life in India. At the New York airport, reminiscing about the experience of returning to India, Atin feels relieved that he had not closed the doors of his passage back to America by translating into action his thought of tearing up the Green Card prior to departing for India. To him, Siddhartha's thought of yet again endeavouring to settle in India is a manifestation of his guilt for circumstances he was not in the least responsible for—Siddhartha's father's death in an accident during his parents' visit to America, and his mother's stubborn decision to live alone in Calcutta instead of staying back in America with him and his family.

The scene at the Denver airport at the outset projects Atin as one who has absolutely, and, in fact, without any qualms of conscience, detached himself from his Indian ties, when, upon the receipt of the news of his father being gravely ill, he negates all possibilities of visiting Calcutta by abandoning his work trip. In a selfishly cruel stance, Atin inwardly blames his father for falling ill at a crucial juncture in his career when he is to be rewarded with a significant career rise after the success of the business trip. Internally, Atin wishes that instead of the news of the illness, he had received the news of his father's death, which would have spared him the moral dilemma of having to choose between completing his work trip, and going to Calcutta by abandoning the trip mid-way, and thereby relinquishing the prospects it promises. At this point, Atin seems to emblematize Bharati Mukherjee's real-life self-description in her essay "On Being an American Writer", where she claims, "I came to a profound conclusion. I was no longer Indian in mind or spirit - [and thus] the multifarious tyrannies of a loving family [back home] was no longer tolerable to me" (Mukherjee 2025). In a similar vein, it is apparent that Atin's connection to his parents is no longer a bond of love, but is rather a bondage of responsibility. A responsibility which is discharged, as his thought process reveals, by him sending a hundred dollars every month to his mother, with the value of the dollar being on a rise. Atin muses, "There must not be any financial constraints; the bank has a standing instruction to send a hundred dollars to Ma each month. A hundred dollars amounts to twelve hundred rupees, and the value of the dollar is constantly rising" (Gangopadhyay 1989: 606). Therefore, to him the prospect of his aged father's death is also not a tragedy but is only a natural culmination of life. He argues to himself:

> I would have remained calm had I even received the news of Baba's passing away. Baba is almost seventy; he has led life on his own terms. We will all have to die one day […]

> With adequate medical care he may live for another ten to twelve years […] Ma is expecting me to visit and take care of things […] There is nothing for me to do there. She has adequate financial resources […] Sharmila is thinking I am disturbed by this news. All I am feeling is a dilemma. Visiting India, amidst this important assignment is a hassle […] Had Baba breathed his last, there would have been no rush.
>
> (Gangopadhyay 1989: 610–11)

However, that the India-American immigrant experience is not a unidimensional choice of one world over the other is brought to light by Gangopadhyay in the Denver airport scene itself. In her criticism of the projection of the female Indian immigrants' unqualified choosing of America over India in Bharati Mukherjee's novels, Brinda Bose argues "what gets covered in the flurry of change and action is the conflict and confusion of the 'whole cross-cultural business' […] the trauma of getting used to the idea that one is not going to be completely at home in either place" (Bose 1993: 49). This trauma finds expression through Atin. Amidst thoughts that reflect his complete engrossment in the pursuit of the American Dream, Atin, while still at the Denver airport, is suddenly jolted by his mind conjuring up the image of his mother in widow's white all alone in a nursing home in Calcutta, "The image made him shiver; forty-one-year-old, confident, success-hunter Atin Majumder metamorphosed into a young boy. He wanted to run to his mother" (Gangopadhyay 1989: 611). A self and career centric Atin, who had moments before justified to himself his decision of not visiting his sick father, drawing upon his father's history of failing to reach his grandfather in his deathbed, is shown to be overpowered by a feeling of helplessness and an acute sense of alienation and isolation, "In this country no one spares more than a glance for strangers; no one takes a peek to into another's mind without a reason. How helplessly alone is Atin in this vast airport" (Gangopadhyay 1989: 611). Atin, thereafter, is portrayed as desperate to reach his father, while he is still alive, and clear all misunderstandings with a response that contradicts and complicates his earlier image of fully and comfortably assimilating into the life of his chosen country:

> I must let Baba know […] even before joining the Ph.D. I wanted to return; you all only forbade me […] even today I do not like living in this foreign land; I have not developed roots in this country; […] Sharmila too, after so many years, has not come to like the life of this country. She is ready to return any day. But our children refuse to go. India is not their country; they feel no connection to the land or its people.
>
> (Gangopadhyay 1989: 615)

Sunil Gangopadhyay thus projects that the greatest irony of Atin's Indian-American hyphenated subject position is the fact that the very child for whose future prospect of returning to India, Atin had once embraced the safety of America, eventually becomes the cause of his inability to leave America for India.

Arindam Ghosh claims that although Atin becomes successful, "fulfilling the stereotypical American dream of prosperity, at another level he is disenchanted by his corporate-suburban life, and quite lost in terms of […] purpose" (Ghosh 2015: 33). However, I argue that Atin's disillusionment is not the outcome of a dissatisfied professional life or a lack of purpose. It develops from his inability to completely adhere to either side of his hyphenated identity. Sunil Gangopadhyay further delineates, through the scenarios at the Denver hotel, how Atin suffers inwardly due to his feelings of being an outsider both in his adopted country and in his country of origin. This, as is evident from the portrayal of Atin, is a marked deviation

from his outer image of being ensconced in the American professional sphere as Dr. Atin Majumder and in the personal space of his Indian-American family and the Indian-American expatriate community of New York/New Jersey. At the Denver airport, Atin's thought of what is essential for him to clarify to his father serves a disclosure of him not being able to integrate fully into American life and remaining an outsider in his adopted world. Alone at the hotel, he admits to himself that the real reason, which he has never before acknowledged to others or even to his own self, of his inability to re-settle in India with his family was the feeling of being an outsider in his own country. This sense of being perpetually alienated from his former world in Calcutta was generated in him particularly by the responses of two people who had been integral to this world for him - his erstwhile best friend and comrade Kaushik and his former love interest Oli. While Kaushik had displayed indifference, Oli had adopted a very polite and yet subtle unforgiving stance towards him. As Atin confesses to himself, he had been prepared for the dearth of professional opportunities and the discomforts of day to day life in India, the causes he had cited for his permanent return to America. However, what he had been truly unprepared for and had failed to accept was the rejection by Oli and Kaushik of him as one of their own:

> A hurt Atin had physically shaken Kaushik and asked "why are you treating me like an outsider? Do I smell of America? Are you still angry that I could not be there for you when you were in grave danger? I too have faced severe danger alone." Kaushik had replied with a pale smile: "It's nothing like that. Can you leave everything and come and stay with us in Jhargram's Binpur? We can communicate like before, only when we are at the same level as before."
>
> (Gangopadhyay 1989: 613)

As he writes in his autobiography *Ardhek Jibon[Half a Life]* Sunil Gangopadhyay himself had been apprehensive of being denied his former place among his friends in Calcutta, upon his return from America (Gangopadhyay 2002: 264). What had been only an apprehension for the author, is transformed by him into a reality for his character Atin, rendering Atin an outsider in his native world.

The narrative represents the space of in-betweenness of identities as virtually an entrapment for the Indian-American diasporic subject Atin, once he becomes cognizant of the fact that as an American citizen he can no longer visit India without a visa. In his tumultuous state of mind, Atin seemed not to remember, or as Gangopadhyay, hinting at a doubt at the obvious, writes "perhaps did not want to remember" this aspect of his immigrant existence (Gangopadhyay 1989: 620). This reality of Atin's subject position is laid bare to him through the remark of Atin's co-worker Jim. To Atin's agitated declaration that he would resign from his job to reach his father at the earliest, Jim responds:

> Your intention is noble, but you don't really have an option. You think you are Indian, but you are no longer an Indian […] your passport is American. You need a visa to go to India. Everything is closed on the weekend; you won't be able to get a visa.
>
> (Gangopadhyay 1989: 619)

Further, Jim humorously adds, "Atin Majumder you are trapped; you are an American now" (Gangopadhyay 1989: 620). Through the character of Atin, Sunil Gangopadhyay seems to suggest that no matter how ardently the immigrant seeks to remould himself in his adopted world, relegating the past in the native land to oblivion, he can never disentangle himself from

this past. In a state of acute helplessness, which is caused by a sense of his inability to resist virtual confinement in America, what had ceased to concern Atin in the life he had created for himself in America returns to haunt him. Once again he feels guilty of having failed his own in India - his friends with whom he once shared an ideology, Oli who had loved him, and his parents - by not being present to support any of them. Like his initial days in America, after decades in the country, alone in the Denver hotel, Atin is yet again consumed with remorse at the thought that he is perceived as selfish by those he has left behind in India – "Kaushik and Pompom believe he has stayed back in America for the love of dollars and trivial material comforts; 'Ma [...] Do you think so too?'" (Gangopadhyay 1989: 621). He remembers his dead elder brother Piklu, who had died trying to save him from drowning; Atin holds himself responsible for his brother's death. Atin reflects on the murder he had committed; he realises that it was his desperate attempt to save the Naxalite leader Manika-da, whom he had subconsciously accorded the position of his dead elder brother. Thus the murder was his subconscious endeavour to atone for the death of his own brother by saving Manik-da from his attacker. Atin feels he has even killed the person Oli was in her youth by discarding her from his life. A despairing and vulnerable Atin draws out from the deep recesses of his mind yet another never disclosed but seminal truth, which has governed the course of his life. He recalls that his relationship with Sharmila had been initiated through an act of physical intimacy with her while he was hiding in Jamshedpur after committing the murder. However, the reason he had engaged in this act, which resulted in a betrayal of Oli, was his mistaking Sharmila to be Oli in a state of feverish delirium. The narratorial voice states, "No one knows this. He couldn't tell Oli about this later as he didn't want to insult her" (Gangopadhyay 1989: 621).

In the Indian-American immigrant narratives of Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri, professional success brings satisfaction and fulfilment to the lives of the immigrant men and endorses their choice of an immigrant life in America. Mukherjee's and Divakaruni's women relish the opportunity of self-remaking that America, devoid of the conservatism of Indian society, offers them, and willingly detach themselves from their Indian roots. Lahiri's women characters like Ashima (*Namesake*) and Aparna ("Hell-Heaven") eventually come to accept that they belong at once to both India and America, and without either, their self-definition is incomplete. Hence, the hyphen in their identity translates into "and," resolving the sense of conflict between its two sides. However, in Sunil Gangopadhyay's narrative, despite achieving professional and personal success in America, the hyphen in Atin's Indian-American identity remains a marker of his existence in a liminal space between two worlds, problematized by a sense of guilt of betraying his own and conditioned by much that Atin has failed to articulate.

The final image of Atin in the novel is him, in a naked state, lying all alone on the fire escape on the roof of the hotel in Denver. Atin is shown for the final time in the novel as being detached from everything and everyone in America or India and not answering the phone but wondering whether it is Sharmila calling him from New Jersey or Oli from Calcutta returning the call he had made to her, after more than a decade, to inquire about his father.

> Who is calling Sharmila or Oli? Is his father alive or not? Why does he even need to know? Two oceans stretch on two sides; Atin has no ticket, no visa. He won't be able to jump and cross the ocean like Hanuman. There is no point in explaining his situation to anyone. He is caged. It's of no use knowing whether his father is alive or not. There are no clothes on his body; he is almost suspended in space. He is almost like an animal […] like the ancestor of humankind i.e. a monkey. He cannot be categorised as Indian or American.
>
> (Gangopadhyay 1989: 622)

Such a culmination of the character arc of Atin signifies his absolutely alienated suspension in the conflicted in-between space of his hyphenated Indian-American identity, with the two women, Oli and Sharmila, representing the two sides of the hyphen.

3 Conclusion

In his autobiography *Ardhek Jibon [Half a Life],* Sunil Gangopadhyay mentions observing himself naked in the mirror at a point when he was torn between remaining in America and returning to India and how that had helped him to arrive at the decision of leaving America for India (Gangopadhyay 2002: 266-67). It is interesting to note that in the novel, Atin's nakedness is displayed at a moment which defines that he can never belong wholly either to India or to America and must perennially linger, isolated and dissatisfied, in the liminal space of his hyphenated Indian-American identity. In this final depiction of Atin, Sunil Gangopadhyay seems to put Atin beyond human parameters into the realm of animalization, first through the image of the Monkey-God "Hanuman," and then through the image of a "monkey." Atin is not just neither Indian nor American; he seems to be alienated from humankind itself.

In *Purbo-Paschim Vol II*, through the character of Atin Majumder, Sunil Gangopadhyay thus portrays Indian-American diasporic identity formation as a complex multi-phased and multi-layered process, which eludes any simplistic categorization of belonging fully to either side of the hyphen. The first phase of Atin's immigrant life in America is projected as one of painful exile and alienation caused by the removal from what is his own - his homeland and its people. The second phase depicts Atin's reluctant acceptance of America as his inevitable destination, and the initiation of his acculturation into American life. The third phase initially appears to be completely orthogonal to the first two; in this phase, at the beginning, Atin seems to have completely assimilated into the American world, dissociating himself from the world of his origins. Yet, this phase gradually unravels the complicated and conflicted subject position of the hyphenated Indian-American immigrant. It becomes obvious that no matter how actively Atin has striven to define and redefine himself, Atin's Indian roots and his choice of being an American citizen never come together harmoniously to define him. They remain conflicted and suspend him perpetually, all by himself, in the problematic in-between space of his hyphenated identity.

Thus not only is Calcutta based Bengali writer Sunil Gangopadhyay's exploration of the issue of cross-cultural migration from India to America, in a Bengali novel, an interesting rarity, his depiction of the diasporic subject position is also distinct from that of Indian-American writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Professional success endorses the choice of America over India for the male characters in the works of Lahiri, Mukherjee and Divakaruni. Mukherjee and Divakaruni's women find fulfillment in the freedom of choices that America offers to them in contrast to the constrictions imposed by the conservative Indian society; Lahiri's women characters finally embrace an

identity that is at once Indian and American. In contrast, Sunil Gangopadhyay's Atin remains suspended forever in the liminal space of his hyphenated Indian-American identity. Atin lacks stable affiliation to either side of the hyphen and emerges as a figure of the diasporic individual who is alienated and isolated both in his country of origin and his adopted country, to the extent that he seems to be alienated from humankind itself.

Notes

1 Sunil Gangopadhyay (1934- 2012), among several other awards, was the recipient of the Bankim Puraskar in 1982, the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1985, and the Ananda Puraskar twice in 1972 and 1989. Gangopadhyay was the executive board member of Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi from 1998-2002.

2 For further discussion on these aspects of Gangopadhyay's writings, see Goswami (2012), Chakrabarti (1991), Chatterjee (2009), and Bhattacharya (2013)

3 For further discussion, see Singh (2014), and Ghosh (2015).

4 For further discussion, see Singh (2014), and Ghosh (2015).

5 An English translation of volume *Purbo-Paschim Volume I* was published in 2000, and an English translation of *Volume II* was published in 2004. However, the translations for the quotes from the novel used in this paper have been done by me.

6 Bani Basu (1939–) is one of the most powerful contemporary women voices in Bengali literature, who has received popular as well as critical acclaim. She has to her credit 12 novels, and several short stories and essays. Among other awards, Bani Basu was the recipient of the Ananda Puraskar in 1997, Bankim Puraskar in 1998, and Sahitya Akademi Award in 2010.

7 Meghnadbad Rahasya is a 2017 Bengali film of the thriller genre directed by Anik Dutta.

8 For further discussion see Ahmed (2010).

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