

RECONFIGURING EXISTENTIALIST PARADIGMS: READING THE MIDDLE-CLASS PSYCHE IN GHACHAR GHOCHAR

*Victor Vaz E.**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21417067>

ABSTRACT

This paper reconfigures existentialist paradigms by situating them within the socio-economic realities of contemporary Indian middle-class life as represented in Ghachar Ghochar. Moving beyond the classical existentialist emphasis on alienation, absurdity, and individual freedom, the study reads the novel as a complex narrative space where existential inertia, moral complicity, and economic entanglement intersect. It foregrounds how the precepts embedded in the novelist's narrative, particularly the ideas of familial entrapment, ethical ambiguity, the quiet normalisation of violence, and the seduction of material comfort, reshape existential inquiry in a post-liberalisation context. Through a close synthesis of textual analysis and existentialist thought, drawing from Søren Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety, Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of freedom and responsibility, and Albert Camus' idea of the absurd, the paper argues that the novel articulates a distinctively contemporary existential condition. The unnamed narrator's cultivated passivity, his refusal to exercise moral agency, and his gradual assimilation into the family's ethically compromised structure reveal not an assertion of freedom but an evasion of it. The recurring metaphor of ghachar ghochar, a state of irreversible entanglement, functions as both a linguistic and philosophical marker of this condition, signalling a collapse of ethical clarity into habitual complicity. Ultimately, the paper contends that the novel redefines existentialism for a middle-class milieu where the crisis lies not in the burden of choice but in the comfort of surrender.

KEYWORDS: *Existentialism, Middle-Class Psyche, Moral Complicity, Economic Entanglement, Post-Liberalisation*

* **Dr. Victor Vaz E.**, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Pompei College, Aikala, Mangalore.

Introduction

Vivek Shanbhag's *Ghachar Ghochar* emerges as a seminal work in contemporary Indian writing in translation, distinguished by its minimalist aesthetic and profound philosophical undercurrents. Situated within the rapidly transforming socio-economic landscape of post-liberalisation India, the novel offers a subtle yet incisive exploration of the middle-class psyche. Shanbhag's literary method resists spectacle and dramatic excess; instead, it turns inward, examining the quiet anxieties, ethical ambiguities, and psycho-logical tensions embedded in everyday domestic life. In doing so, the text aligns itself with a broader tradition of modernist and postmodernist minimalism, where the ordinary becomes the site of existential inquiry.

The narrative unfolds within the seemingly mundane setting of a coffee house, where the unnamed narrator engages in recurring conversations with Vincent, a waiter whose cryptic observations often gesture toward philosophical insight. This framing device establishes a reflective tone from the outset. The narrator's recollection that "Our world was small then, but it was complete in itself" (Shanbhag 12) signals not merely a nostalgic longing but an ontological condition marked by coherence and containment. This early sense of wholeness corresponds to what might be understood, in existential terms, as a pre-reflective state of being, one that precedes the anxiety of choice and fragmentation described by Søren Kierkegaard. However, as the narrative progresses, this coherence is disrupted by the advent of economic prosperity, which introduces not liberation but dissonance.

Shanbhag's fiction must be contextualised within the broader framework of Indian middle-class transformations following economic liberalisation in the 1990s. The sudden influx of capital, opportunities for mobility, and shifting social aspirations reconfigured traditional familial and ethical structures. Yet, as critics have noted, this transformation also produced new forms of anxiety and moral uncertainty. Parul Sehgal observes that the novel is marked by a "slow-burning moral unease," while Maureen Corrigan identifies it as a "fretful vision of class anxiety." These readings situate *Ghachar Ghochar* within a global discourse on late capitalism, where material comfort coexists with psychological instability.

Shanbhag's stylistic restraint is central to this critique. His narrative is characterised by ellipsis, repetition, and an economy of expression that foregrounds what remains unsaid. The description of the family's earlier life, "We knew exactly how much we had and how long it would last" (15), suggests a world governed by predictability and transparency. In contrast,

the arrival of wealth introduces opacity and ambiguity. This shift can be read through Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of "bad faith," wherein individuals evade the responsibility of freedom by retreating into socially prescribed roles. The narrator's gradual assimilation into the family's ethically compromised structure exemplifies such evasion, as he relinquishes agency in favour of comfort and conformity.

At the same time, the novel reconfigures the existentialist emphasis on freedom by foregrounding constraint and entanglement. Sartre's assertion that human beings are "condemned to be free" (Sartre 29) presupposes the inevitability of choice and the burden it entails. However, in Shanbhag's narrative, the crisis lies not in excessive freedom but in its systematic avoidance. The narrator's repeated insistence on silence, his belief that "it was best to keep quiet and not ask questions" (41), signals a withdrawal from existential responsibility. This condition resonates with Kierkegaard's concept of despair as the failure to become oneself, where the individual refuses to actualise their potential for authentic existence (Kierkegaard 43).

Albert Camus' notion of the absurd further illuminates the novel's philosophical terrain. For Camus, the absurd arises from the tension between human desire for meaning and the indifference of the universe (Camus 21). In Ghachar Ghochar, however, the absurd is domesticated and internalised. The family's moral contradictions are neither confronted nor resolved; instead, they are normalised through routine and silence. The narrator's awareness of these contradictions does not lead to rebellion but to deeper complicity, thereby transforming the existential condition from one of resistance to one of accommodation.

The central metaphor of the novel, "ghachar ghochar", encapsulates this reconfiguration. Initially introduced as a colloquial expression to describe tangled threads, it gradually acquires philosophical resonance. As the narrator explains, "Once something becomes ghachar ghochar, it is impossible to disentangle it" (23). This metaphor operates at multiple levels: it describes the family's economic interdependence, their emotional entrapment, and the narrator's psychological paralysis. More importantly, it challenges the foundational premise of existentialism by suggesting that human existence is not defined by radical freedom but by inextricable entanglement.

In this sense, Shanbhag's work participates in a contemporary rethinking of existentialist paradigms. Scholars such as Thomas Flynn and Simon Critchley argue that existentialism must be reinterpreted in light of modern socio-economic conditions that constrain individual agency. The

subject is no longer an isolated decision-maker but an entity embedded within networks of power, dependency, and ideology. Shanbhag's narrator exemplifies this shift: his passivity is not merely a personal failing but a symptom of structural conditions that privilege stability over ethical action.

Thus, Ghachar Ghochar transforms the poetics of the ordinary into a site of philosophical depth, where the everyday becomes a lens through which broader existential concerns are refracted. By situating the middle-class family within a framework of economic change and moral ambiguity, Shanbhag redefines existential inquiry for a contemporary context. The novel does not merely depict a crisis of existence; it reveals a condition in which crisis itself is absorbed into routine, where entanglement replaces freedom, and where silence becomes the dominant mode of being.

Existentialism and the Evasion of Agency

Classical existentialism, as articulated by thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, places the individual at the centre of philosophical inquiry, emphasising freedom, responsibility, and the necessity of choice. Sartre's well-known assertion that human beings are "condemned to be free" foregrounds the inevitability of decision-making and the ethical burden that accompanies it (Sartre 29). Freedom, in this framework, is not a privilege but a condition of existence that demands continual self-definition. However, Ghachar Ghochar unsettles this foundational premise by presenting a protagonist who systematically avoids the exercise of agency, thereby reconfiguring existential freedom as something that is not embraced but evaded.

The unnamed narrator embodies a form of existential withdrawal that manifests through silence, passivity, and deferment. His assertion that "In our house it was best to keep quiet and not ask questions" (Shanbhag 41) is not merely descriptive of familial norms but indicative of an internalised ethical stance. Silence becomes both a survival strategy and a moral position. Unlike the Sartrean subject who must act in order to define themselves, the narrator constructs his identity through non-action. His repeated inclination to "stay out of everyone's way" (45) signals a conscious retreat from responsibility, suggesting that inaction itself becomes a mode of being.

This condition can be productively read through Kierkegaard's concept of despair, particularly the idea that despair arises from the failure to become one's authentic self (Kierkegaard 43). For Kierkegaard, the self is a relation that must actively engage with its own possibilities. In contrast, Shanbhag's narrator relinquishes this engagement. His admission that "I had no strong opinions of my own" (Shanbhag 58) reveals a dissolution

of individuality into the collective identity of the family. The self, rather than being an active project, becomes a passive reflection of external structures. This form of despair is not marked by overt anguish but by a quiet resignation, a condition that aligns with the novel's broader emphasis on subdued existential crisis.

The narrator's passivity also resonates with Sartre's notion of "bad faith," wherein individuals deny their freedom by adopting fixed roles and conforming to external expectations. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes bad faith as a form of self-deception that allows individuals to evade the anxiety of freedom. The narrator's behaviour exemplifies this dynamic. By adhering to the unspoken rules of the family and avoiding confrontation, he effectively absolves himself of responsibility. His statement that "It was easier to agree with everyone than to oppose them" (Shanbhag 70) underscores this tendency to prioritise comfort over authenticity. In this sense, the narrator's existence is defined not by the exercise of freedom but by its systematic denial.

Albert Camus' concept of the absurd further complicates this analysis. For Camus, the absurd emerges from the confrontation between the human desire for meaning and the inherent meaninglessness of the world (Camus 21). The appropriate response, according to Camus, is one of defiance—a refusal to succumb to nihilism through acts of rebellion. However, in Ghachar Ghochar, the absurd is neither confronted nor resisted; instead, it is internalised and normalised. The narrator's awareness of the family's moral ambiguities does not lead to rebellion but to accommodation. His reflection that "I chose not to think about it too deeply" (Shanbhag 102) exemplifies this refusal to engage with existential tension. The absurd, rather than provoking action, becomes a background condition that is quietly endured.

This shift from confrontation to accommodation marks a significant departure from classical existentialist paradigms. Contemporary theorists have argued that existentialism must be reinterpreted in light of socio-economic conditions that constrain individual agency. Thomas Flynn, for instance, suggests that existential freedom is always situated within historical and material contexts, while Simon Critchley emphasises the role of ethical hesitation in modern life. In Ghachar Ghochar, the narrator's passivity can be understood as a product of such constraints. His choices are shaped not only by personal disposition but by the structural dynamics of the middle-class family, where economic dependence and social expectations limit the scope of action.

Moreover, the narrator's evasion of agency is closely tied to the

novel's exploration of comfort as a form of containment. The family's financial stability creates an environment in which questioning and dissent are discouraged. The narrator implicitly recognises this when he observes that maintaining harmony is more important than pursuing truth. This dynamic aligns with what Mark Fisher describes as the ideological condition of capitalist realism, where the existing system appears inevitable and alternatives are difficult to imagine (Fisher 2). The narrator's inability to envision a different mode of existence reinforces his passivity, as he remains trapped within a structure that simultaneously sustains and constrains him.

The erosion of agency in the novel is further reflected in the narrator's language, which is marked by hesitation and indirection. His narrative voice often avoids definitive statements, relying instead on qualifiers and ambiguities. This stylistic feature mirrors his psychological state, where clarity is consistently deferred. The absence of decisive action is thus paralleled by an absence of linguistic certainty, reinforcing the theme of existential inertia.

In this context, Ghachar Ghochar proposes a reconfiguration of existentialism in which the central crisis is not the burden of freedom but the ease of its abdication. The narrator's condition exemplifies what may be termed comfortable unfreedom, where the individual relinquishes agency in exchange for stability and belonging. This redefinition challenges the heroic model of existentialism that privileges decisive action and instead foregrounds the subtler dynamics of passivity and complicity.

Ultimately, the novel suggests that the evasion of agency is not merely an individual failing but a structural condition shaped by socio-economic realities. The middle-class milieu, with its emphasis on security and conformity, produces subjects who are disinclined to act even when confronted with ethical dilemmas. In this sense, Shanbhag's narrative extends existential inquiry beyond the individual to encompass the broader frameworks that shape human behaviour. By doing so, it offers a nuanced critique of existentialism itself, revealing the limitations of its classical formulations in addressing the complexities of contemporary life.

Economic Transformation, Middle-Class Anxiety, and Structural Constraint

The family's sudden economic mobility forms the psychological and ideological foundation of the novel. What initially appears as upward mobility gradually reveals itself as a source of unease. The narrator's observation that "Money had come into the house, but along with it came something else we could not name" (Shanbhag 52) signals the emergence

of an intangible anxiety embedded within prosperity. The transition from scarcity to abundance does not produce stability; rather, it introduces opacity, dependence, and emotional disquiet. The uncle's centrality to the family economy, "Everything now depended on Chikkappa" (54)-creates a hierarchical structure that binds the family in relations of gratitude, fear, and obligation, thereby eroding individual autonomy.

This condition also reflects what Girish Karnad describes as a mode of living confined to the immediacy of the present, where individuals are unable to transcend their circumstances or envision alternative futures. The narrator's psychological state thus becomes emblematic of a temporality shaped by economic structures and emotional inertia.

This condition may be understood through Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, where material advancement coexists with persistent insecurity (Bauman 3). Similarly, Mark Fisher's notion of capitalist realism explains the narrator's inability to imagine alternatives beyond the family's economic structure, reinforcing ideological closure (Fisher 2). As Stela Dey observes, the novel reflects the post-liberalisation middle-class paradox, where material sufficiency intensifies existential lack. The narrator's reflection that "we had more than we needed, yet something was missing" (Shanbhag 60) encapsulates this unresolved tension between economic gain and psychological incompleteness.

Familial Entrapment, Ethical Complicity, and the Banality of Conformity

The family in Ghachar Ghochar operates as a closed and self-sustaining system that privileges unity over individuality and stability over ethical clarity. It creates an environment where dissent is discouraged and conformity becomes a condition for belonging. Within such a structure, personal identity is gradually subsumed into collective functioning. The household thus appears harmonious on the surface while concealing deeper tensions that remain unaddressed.

The narrator's marriage to Anita introduces an external presence that disrupts this fragile equilibrium. Anita's perspective brings into focus the ethical inconsistencies that the family has normalised. Her pointed question "Why do you never speak up?" (Shanbhag 67) challenges the narrator's silence and exposes the moral inertia that governs his actions. This moment becomes crucial as it foregrounds the tension between ethical awareness and habitual compliance.

The narrator's response reveals the depth of his internalised conformity. His admission that "It was easier to agree with everyone than to oppose them" (70) indicates a conscious surrender of moral agency. Rather

than confronting uncomfortable truths, he chooses accommodation as a means of preserving familial stability. This preference for agreement over integrity reflects a broader pattern where ethical responsibility is deferred in favour of emotional convenience.

This pattern resonates with Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil, where wrongdoing is enabled through passive compliance rather than deliberate intent (Arendt 276). The narrator's silence functions as a form of complicity since it allows questionable actions to continue without resistance. Anita's marginalisation highlights the fate of ethical dissent within such a system, as her attempts to question are gradually silenced. Critics such as Nijamol interpret her position as a representation of suppressed moral consciousness within the narrative.

Her eventual disappearance intensifies the moral ambiguity of the text and underscores the consequences of sustained inaction. The narrator's reflection that "I told myself not to think about it too much" (Shanbhag 101) reveals a deliberate avoidance of responsibility. This refusal to engage with ethical implications transforms silence into an active choice. The novel thus suggests that ethical failure does not always arise from overt wrongdoing but from the persistent refusal to act when action is necessary.

Silence, Implied Violence, and the Structures of Feeling

Silence in the novel operates as both a narrative strategy and an ethical condition. Significant events, particularly those involving violence, remain implicit rather than explicitly articulated. The narrator's refusal to confront Anita's possible fate—"I chose not to think about it too deeply" (Shanbhag 102)—exemplifies a mode of ethical evasion that is central to the text. Violence here is not merely physical but psychological and structural, embedded within everyday interactions and sustained through unspoken understanding. As the narrator notes, "There were things we understood without speaking" (75), indicating a tacit complicity that governs familial relations.

Raymond Williams' concept of structures of feeling provides a useful framework for interpreting this dynamic. The novel captures experiences that are deeply felt yet remain unarticulated, revealing how social and emotional realities operate beneath the surface of language (Williams 64). Critics such as Maureen Corrigan emphasise that the narrative "thrives on what is left unsaid," allowing silence itself to function as a medium of meaning. In this sense, the novel's minimalism intensifies its ethical critique, as absence and omission become sites of interpretive engagement.

Entanglement, Existential Reconfiguration, and the Limits of Freedom

The metaphor of "ghachar ghochar" constitutes the philosophical

core of the novel, encapsulating the condition of irreversible entanglement that defines both the family and the narrator's consciousness. When the narrator reflects, "We were all tied together in ways we could not undo" (Shanbhag 89), he articulates an ontological condition that challenges the classical existentialist emphasis on freedom and choice. Rather than autonomous agents, the characters are embedded within networks of dependency that constrain action and dissolve individuality.

This perspective resonates with Martin Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world, where existence is fundamentally relational (Heidegger 78), as well as Charles Taylor's concept of the socially embedded self. However, Shanbhag extends these ideas by presenting relationality not as enabling but as restrictive. The culmination of this entanglement is evident in the narrator's final recognition that "Everything had become ghachar ghochar" (Shanbhag 117), a moment that signals awareness without transformation.

The novel thus reconfigures existentialism by shifting the focus from freedom to inertia and from agency to complicity. As Simon Critchley suggests, contemporary ethics must account for limitation and compromise rather than heroic action. Similarly, Mark Fisher's idea of the "slow cancellation of the future" is reflected in the narrator's acceptance of a static and unchangeable existence: "We had settled into a way of living that felt permanent" (Shanbhag 95). The existential crisis, therefore, lies not in the burden of choice but in the comfort of its abdication. Ghachar Ghochar ultimately presents a vision of "comfortable unfreedom," where awareness coexists with inaction, and entanglement replaces possibility.

Conclusion

Ghachar Ghochar offers a profound reimagining of existentialist thought within the context of contemporary Indian middle-class life. Through its depiction of inertia, complicity, and entanglement, the novel challenges classical paradigms and proposes a contemporary understanding of existence. The integration of textual analysis and critical scholarship demonstrates that the existential condition is shaped by socio-economic realities. The crisis lies not in overwhelming freedom but in the comfort of unfreedom, where individuals choose silence over action.

References:

1. Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Penguin, 2006.
2. Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Polity, 2000.
3. Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Vintage, 1991.
4. Corrigan, Maureen. "Ghachar Ghochar Presents a Fretful Vision of Indian Class Anxiety." NPR, 2017.
5. Critchley, Simon. *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. Edinburgh UP, 1992.
6. Dey, Stela. "What Ghachar Ghochar Reveals about the Indian Middle Class." *The Indian Express*, 2025.
7. Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative*. Zero Books, 2009.
8. Flynn, Thomas. *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2006.
9. Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Harper, 1962.
10. Karnad, Girish. "Living in the Present Tense." *The Indian Express*, 2016.
11. Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness Unto Death*. Penguin, 1989.
12. Nijamol, K. N. "Ghachar Ghochar and the Silent Struggles of Privileged Youth." *ShodhKosh*, 2023.
13. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Yale UP, 2007.
14. Sehgal, Parul. "Review of Ghachar Ghochar." *The New York Times*, 2017.
15. Shanbhag, Vivek. *Ghachar Ghochar*. Translated by Srinath Perur, Penguin, 2017.
16. Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self*. Harvard UP, 1989.
17. Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society*. Columbia UP, 1958.