

Neither Here Nor Within: Diasporic Alienation in Kiran Desai's *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*

^{*1} Drishyarita Gogoi and ²Dr. Diganta Borgohain

^{*1} Research Scholar, Department of English, Bhattadev University, Assam, India.

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bhattadev University, Assam, India.

Article Info.

E-ISSN: **2583-6528**

Impact Factor (QJIF): **8.4**

Peer Reviewed Journal

Available online:

www.alladvancejournal.com

Received: 12/Jan/2026

Accepted: 14/Feb/2026

*Corresponding Author

Drishyarita Gogoi

Research Scholar, Department of
English, Bhattadev University, Assam,
India.

Abstract

Kiran Desai's *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* tells an intertwined tale of two young individuals who leave India to study abroad with their incandescent dreams that so often accompany today's youth. Their transnational move to a "better" world is considered to provide them with better opportunity, academic ascension and aid in their cosmopolitan becoming. To leave one's homeland is to ascend, while to return prematurely is to disappoint. However, in reality and in the novel, the United States exposes them to subtle and overt forms of racism, stereotyping and cultural flattery. In an attempt to reconcile who they are with who they are expected to be and what part should they conceal in order to get accepted, they are met with alienation. Their lives in the foreign country become suspended in liminality and cultural in-betweenness. The characters feel unseen, disconnected and fragmented. They try to deny or suppress their individuality and cultural authenticity in the hopes of fitting into the foreign world which in turn deepen their internal void and makes them more alien. This paper attempts to study how *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* reveals the multifaceted nature of alienation produced by the pressures of diaspora. Sonia and Sunny's story becomes emblematic of a larger generational condition of loneliness that is marked by mimicry, ambivalence and a continuous negotiation of their sense of selfhood.

Keywords: Diaspora, Alienation, Stereotypes, Othering, Microaggression, Ethnocentrism, Loneliness.

Introduction

The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny, a 2025 Booker Prize shortlisted novel by Kiran Desai, published in the Hogarth press occupies a distinctive position within contemporary South Asian diasporic literature. Written nearly after two decades, it is set primarily between 1996 and 2002, and follows the story of two young Indians whose lives unfold against the backdrop of the late twentieth century globalisation where academic migration was viewed common. Sonia is pursuing higher education in the quiet and isolating landscapes of Vermont where the geographical remoteness intensifies her emotional solitude, and Sunny, a recent graduate of Columbia University is seen suspended between return and departure as he contemplates a future in the United States. In the novel, Sunny and Sonia move through their lives as figures in search of love and coherence within a world that offers them with no stable centre. Before finding each other and falling in love, Sonia and Sunny are entangled in earlier toxic relationships with their respective partners-Sonia with

Ilan, an American artist whose narcissism and control makes Sonia question her own sense of self and Sunny with Ulla, whose western privilege puts Sunny into self-denial over his own roots and culture. These prior relationships are not merely encounters but it rather helps in shaping their personalities and also conditions them how to desire, submit and negotiate their belonging in the foreign world. Sonia and Sunny's trajectory of life run parallel to each other, yet remain uneven in terms of their personal types of aspirations and hardships. Love in this novel is not detached from geopolitics; it is mediated by race and nationality. Even though romantic attachment forms its narrative, the novel, *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* cannot be merely read as a simple love story. In the novel, Kiran Desai traces a melange of factors that signal alienation wherein the characters experience a growing disjunction within themselves and their consciousness. Loneliness emerges between the self and the surrounding, it appears between romantic relationships, between husband and wife, and even within parent and

children relationship. Alienation in the novel is thus multidimensional: it is spatial as it emerges as a social reality shaped by borders and power, and simultaneously as a condition that is existential, psychological and also relational. This paper will perform a critical examination of diasporic alienation experienced within the lives of the characters in the novel, studying closely how alienation is produced and experienced by them. It seeks to lay out the conditions that precipitates this estrangement by analysing how intimate interpersonal relationships, racial hierarchies and global transnational power helps in compounding and sustaining alienation.

Sonia and Sunny's journey is marked by a series of disorienting encounters-academic, romantic and social – that reveal how fragile and contingent any sense of home or belonging can be. They fail to locate a narrative that is unequivocally their own. Kiran Desai in an interview to Pen America says:

Sunny and Sonia are both trying to find love and home as they negotiate a world without a center, and as their sense of self turns more and more fluid. They learn lesson after rude lesson in failing to locate their own story, having perhaps mistakenly assigned the center to countries that are not their own, or to individuals who ensnare them. Their claim upon each landscape feels false and unfair, including their claim upon the country of their birth, because they have been brought up to leave, to dissociate themselves from India. More deeply, though, they learn that belonging is nothing more than perspective, there are always other claims upon a landscape. I eventually realized that the non-space, the no-center, was the center of this novel, those in-between places and the unseen world, the idea of the void that gives birth to phantoms, but also to powerful shamanic images and dreams. (pen.org/kiran-desai-the-pen-ten-interview/)

As Desai contends, Sonia and Sunny in the novel attempt to root themselves in foreign landscapes and try to connect and be part of their culture but ultimately these attempts appear tenuous or even fraudulent. Similarly, their relationship with India is itself fragile as their own country of origin no longer functions as a secure point of return. It becomes another place of estrangement and as foreign as the foreign land. In this sense, Sonia and Sunny's alienation extends beyond geographies, encompassing a deeper uncertainty about the very possibility of belonging. For this reason, this paper examines *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* as a study of diasporic alienation arguing that the novel articulates alienation not merely as social isolation but as a crisis that unsettles the very grounds of selfhood. Through this novel, Desai lays forth the cost of living in liminal spaces wherein identity is continually questioned. *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*, ultimately reveals how migration not just decides where one lives, but also how one loves, remembers and understands oneself.

Discussion

Sitting together in the veranda with their shawls in the pallid translucence of the wintry dawn, Ba, Dadaji and Mina Foi begin their morning ritual of sipping tea while deliberating over the day's meals. This quotidian routine, though outwardly seems banal, mirrors the socio-cultural ontology in India where communal proximity defines the very meaning of being. Their lives unfold within a social system of constant presence of family members, relatives, neighbours, servants and so on. Their world doesn't allow solitude because they had never slept in a house alone, had never eaten a meal

alone, never lived in a place where they were unknown, never woken without a cook bringing tea, or without wishing Good Morning to several individuals. (Desai 5)

Therefore, Sonia's condition of loneliness is radically inconceivable to them. They cannot fathom what it means for Sonia to occupy a social and cultural landscape where anonymity functions as normative condition, where silence fills the space between one's thoughts and where the self must be continually constructed without the confirming gaze of others. For them, America is a place of abundance, friendliness and "so much empty space" that they never could think it to be a space where the soul might collapse under the pressure of isolation. According to their Indian parents "the bacchas must never return" (Desai 64) as otherwise it would suggest failure. Hence, Sonia is doubly burdened by her loneliness as she experiences it internally and has to simultaneously suppress it externally. She is expected to manage her distress privately and to convert her vulnerability into resilience. Consequently, Sonia learns to discipline and silently bear her sufferings rather than trying to articulate them as she finds it difficult to put a name to it. Language fails her and becomes inadequate because there are no words to describe a type of loneliness which is neither the familial ache of homesickness nor a clinical form of depression. The language available to her family reduces this type of condition to sentimentality, while the host nation tends to isolate it as an individual pathology. Therefore, caught between these discourses, Sonia is left without a narrative that can authentically hold her experience.

The vastness that Dadaji praises is precisely what crushes Sonia. Owing to her status as a foreign student and the restrictive nature of her visa, Sonia's visa traps her in the unforgiving Vermont winter while her peers scatter across the country to avail different internships. Unable to return home and unable to work legally, she becomes part of the small contingent of foreign students consigned to the campus through the long winter months.

Sonia's volatile emotions changes like the unpredictable weather. In times she would, overcome with panic, she could weep until the weeping became diarrhoeal; she might then be unexpectedly delivered to a raft of calm; she might be transfixed by the snow's companionship...Then her mood might switch. She might sit by the window feeling as if she were a lonely grandma and watch the flakes gathering speed again, flying by until she felt she were flying herself. (Desai 22)

Her psychic disarray is structurally tethered to her diasporic condition. It cannot be understood merely as homesickness or sentimental loneliness as her family imagines, but rather signals a collapse of her selfhood and weakening of her existential grounding. Her suffering aligns with what Laing describes as 'primary ontological insecurity', a condition in which the individual no longer experiences herself as coherently real, continuous or grounded within the ordinary structures of life. As Laing says, "The individual in the ordinary circumstances of living may feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense, more dead than alive" (Laing 42). Her ontological insecurity emerges within and is intensified by the experience of dislocation and cultural unmooring. Her days are stretched thin across an unfamiliar landscape where nothing reflects or stabilizes her inner being. Sonia's confession, "I've ballooned in my own head...I cannot stop thinking about myself" (Desai 7) suggests her sense of implosion. When she sits alone in her Vermont room surrounded by winter silence, she is not simply alone, she is

terrified of her own nothingness. Due to absence of casual conversations and spontaneous interactions, Sonia's body becomes an isolated site deprived of any ordinary and minor affirmations. Sonia's withdrawal from her parents, her reluctance to fully articulate her suffering and her inability to participate in American social life, all reflect isolation which is enamelled by guilt as she is supposed to feel 'lucky' studying in a 'nicer country'. Therefore she says that, "I spend all my time trying to pretend I am not lonely!" (Desai 34) Under the gaze of the host nation she must appear competent, grateful and self-sufficient. On the other hand, under the gaze of her family she has to uphold the fantasy of success that she has internalized from her home culture.

Away from home and overwhelmed by the loneliness of an alien environment, Sonia clings to her American boyfriend, Ilan. Despite his narcissistic and toxic behaviour she stays with him and names it as love. His incessant need for affirmation—"Do you think I will be famous?... Say it one more time." (Desai 131)—positions him as a vortex around which Sonia must orbit. His constant reassurance and demands create a dynamic where Sonia feels important and momentarily whole. However, Ilan treats her like, a mouse in someone's pocket. He might lose his temper and fling the mouse out of his pocket, but then he always tucked the mouse back in because he needed someone to talk to all of the time. (Desai 133)

Sonia internalises a warped sense of value. But her acquiescence does not merely come from fear or naïveté. Sonia's attachment to Ilan exemplifies the psychic and relational distortions produced by diasporic vulnerability. On the surface, Ilan is the one who insists that he needs her, yet the deeper truth is that Sonia needs him far more, not out of affection but out of a desperate attempt to feel anchored in a foreign land. She feels like an alien and therefore she craves the American validation. Her silence to his commands, "Don't deny me. I'll get angry... Don't take a hot shower again, do you hear?... Do you hear, you have to obey me? He said "o...b...e...y" in a slow, sinister voice...It's time for you to apologize. Get down on your knees and apologize. (Desai 142-51)

Signals a systematic erasure of self and low self-esteem. The lack of dignity and self-respect towards herself is not merely psychological but deeply diasporic. Sonia's restraint mirrors the broader diasporic injunction to remain palatable and grateful to the superior West. As a woman coming from the Third World and navigating the elite academic spaces of the West, Sonia absorbs the unspoken logic that her presence is conditional. Due to inherent global hierarchies, she must appease and prove her worth to the West. She imagines that she owes him something simply because he is American. In this sense, she feels so alienated that even domination is misread as intimacy and abuse do not propel her to leave because submission appears safer than abandonment.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre gives the concept of 'bad faith', also known as 'mauvaise foi', a unique human modality of self-negation through which consciousness turns its power of nihilating the world back upon itself. Here, the self deceives itself as it simultaneously knows and conceals a truth about itself in order to evade the anguish of freedom. Sartre explains that unlike ordinary lying which presupposes a division between the liar and the deceived, bad faith operates within a single consciousness, creating a paradox in which the subject must be both fully aware of the truth and actively engaged in its denial. It targets the core of self by obscuring one's own identity and embracing a comforting fiction of

fixity. Consciousness thus is "a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being"(Sartre 47). It is a performative self-lie that sustains itself through the task of simultaneously affirming and denying the same truth.

Sunny's diasporic self-fashioning is based on this Sartrean "bad faith". Sunny and Ulla's relationship is forged upon a mutual contempt for Indian people. He disavows his own origin in order to inhabit a fantasy of Western legitimacy. Sunny adopts the role of a modern Westernized Indian man because it is easier than confronting the ambivalence of his diasporic self. Bad faith seeks to flee the freedom of one's own existence by taking refuge in a fixed and immutable role. Sunny recognizes his Indianness, yet he nihilates these aspects by projecting a counterfeit self who despises the "ugliness" of India in order to appear morally and socially distinct. The essence of bad faith is to make oneself what one is not, therefore he denies his identity so that he gets accepted by them. In this way, Sunny's attempts to escape the ambiguity of being both Indian and American drives him to a diasporic alienation which ultimately leads him to be estranged from both.

When Ulla's friend recounts her story of being harassed in Rajasthan saying, "My god, being a blonde woman traveling alone in India-they just go mad" (Desai 97), Sunny experiences a cascade of emotions. He feels insulted, gets swamped by guilt, shame and then irritation at having to feel any of these at all. At that moment, he becomes both the accused and the apologist, the native and the one desperate to disown his nativity. He affirms Ulla and her circle that he is 'not like them', not like the Indians invoked in their Orientalist anecdotes. This is what Homi Bhabha calls as 'mimicry', the diasporic subject, Sunny "almost the same but not quite," (Bhabha 86) attempts to reproduce the sensibilities of the Western liberal class to implicitly seek legitimacy through Ulla's whiteness. However, this performance of dissociation from his identity is itself corrosive because he participates in the very discourse that degrades him. Mimicry in this context does not help him in building a sense of belonging but instead it yields a condition of suspended subjectivity where his identity remain perpetually tentative and conditional, and is only sustained through repeated disapproval of himself. To be apprehended as "almost the same" demands a constant self reproach and repudiation of his origins.

Sunny's predicament clearly follows the condition of a diasporic subject who is suspended between cultural matrices. Satya hurls taunts at him saying that, "Your Hindi is terrible, people laugh to hear it. You can't even eat with your hands. It is as if you are ashamed of being Indian. You've become a joke of an NRI. (Desai 265)

Satya exposes the in-betweenness of Sunny's position. Because of performing selective versions of Indianness and Americanness, he has become something else; an alien. Sunny's internal dislocation has perpetually misaligned him with the experiences of both the host land and homeland. While reading the Indian newspaper, he couldn't apprehend the political acronyms, bureaucratic abbreviations and cultural referents;

He understood nothing. How could he be a journalist in India where he understood nothing? The same way he felt he couldn't become a journalist in the United States because he understood nothing. (Desai 321)

The national discourse he is supposed to know becomes a foreign language to him, while he also remains an outsider to the American journalistic culture that he ostensibly chose.

Thus, Sunny becomes alien to both the systems thereby putting himself in a 'third space' as the signs of his cultural identity are getting mixed, split and displaced.

Sunny's American girlfriend held his fractured sense of self in place and gave a meaning to it. When the bartender at Clinton Hill asks him why he looks down, he answers, "I'm alienated...My girlfriend left me." (Desai 340). Ulla's departure breaks his last fragile structure of self. It is not just a simple heartbreak for him because with her being gone, he is forced to face the unmediated void of his unmoored existence. There is no external gaze left for him that can authorise his presence and he is left with no external validation to seek for. Sunny is compelled to confront that he belongs to neither Indian nor American terrain and is at last left existentially homeless exposed to the emptiness he had long attempted to evade by clinging to borrowed forms of belonging.

The racialised stereotypical humiliations that Sunny and Sonia endure abroad expose the microaggressions experienced by diasporic subjects on a daily basis. The casual remarks by the waiter, "India people don't eat cow because they think cow is God" (Desai 485), or the absurd insistence that Indians "pray to a donkey" (Desai 486), reveal how the West projects its own caricatures upon the migrant body. These stereotypes precede and predetermine the diaspora. These remarks are often framed as jokes, curiosities and casual observations, which allows xenophobia to pass as harmless banter. Such interactions operate precisely through the mechanism which Edward Said identifies as Orientalist 'othering', a discursive process that fabricates a simplified, infantilized and often ridiculous version of the 'East' in order to reaffirm the West's cultural authority. The West positions itself as rational and superior while rendering the Other as backward, comic or absurd. The waiter's comments masquerading as curiosity enacts this hierarchy. Moments like this rehearse and reinforce the global order which in a way compels the Orient to explain themselves, correct or even perform for inclusion.

Again, Ulla claims that Indian people "put curry in everything," to which Sunny responds by correcting her, saying that "there's no such thing as curry... it's a fake word invented by the British" (Desai 98). A psychic burden falls on him where he has to continuously defend and explain his culture. Fanon points out that the colonized subject finds himself "overdetermined from without" (Fanon 116) and condemned to carry an identity imposed upon him by others before he can speak. In another instance, Ilan throws out Sonia's Indian dish out of the window joking that it suited the 'stinking' ginkgo tree. Again, when Ilan was expecting a curator to come to his apartment, he says, Sonia should please prepare the table, the food, the plates-and then remain absent. She must not cook and make a sloppy Indian stink, she should not leave her cheap Indian things lying about, which would lower the value of his art. (Desai 184)

In many Western societies, migrant cuisines are often relegated to ridicule where the seemingly mundane act of cooking is scrutinised and regulated. Complaints about 'smelly lunches' in workplaces, restrictions on the preparation of pungent foods in shared housing or residential areas, and the casual contumely directed at non-western or ethnic food operates as mechanisms through which cultural difference is hierarchised. Such cultural differences are policed not only through visual markers like accent or way of dressing but also through the sensory register of smell. This makes racialised and diasporic individuals including migrant students to self-

discipline themselves according to the invisible codes set by the host society.

His casual disdain for her cultural food shows his denigration towards her heritage. Diasporic individuals like Sonia and Sunny go through such subtle moments of xenophobia even within intimate relationships. Ilan and Ulla's latent ethnocentrism grants them the power to magnify or diminish the diasporic subject's individuality according to their own emotional or social convenience. Within this dynamic, Sonia and Sunny become pliable in the eyes of the West. Such stereotyping causes cultural flattening, reducing Sunny and Sonia's identity to predictable cliches like 'smelly food', 'funny accent', 'cow worshipper' and the like. This leaves them both visible and unseen at the same time. It makes them question the legitimacy of their own identities as they feel constantly misrecognised, forced to constantly defend and hide cultural habits and aspects of themselves. However, this labour is exhausting and futile because the energy between both the parties is not symmetrical or reciprocal as no equivalent effort is made back by the dominant culture to understand the migrant subject. Even when they try to assimilate, these characters are reminded that they do not belong-a condition which keeps them suspended in a liminal state.

Their experiences are not episodic misfortune confined to the text but manifestations of the wider geopolitical structures that continue to govern how the migrant is perceived, disciplined and tolerated within the global hierarchy of cultures. The rhetoric of inclusion functions as a curated performance. The celebration of 'diversity' operates only within the limits set by Western epistemic frames requiring the migrant to translate themselves into forms the dominant culture can comfortably digest. Thus, the possibility of a coherent sense of self becomes impossible. Due to the twin pressures of external othering and internal ambivalence, Sonia and Sunny's identities get distorted in a continuous limbo of diasporic alienation.

Conclusion

In essence, Kiran Desai through the novel *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* shows that diaspora does not merely relocate the body but destabilizes the very foundations of selfhood. We can see in the novel that diaspora fractures the self at multiple levels-physically, emotionally, psychologically, socially, culturally and ethically. A significant contrast is seen between their familial homeland, India, and the aspiring yet isolating West. However, the novel resists romanticising either space. India is imagined to be a place one is expected to leave while the West is found to offer acceptance and opportunity only on terms structurally set and dictated by them. Both spaces expose the migrant body to different but equally oppressive pressures. As a result, Sonia and Sunny are left to inhabit a liminal 'third space' in which their belonging and identity are perpetually contested and deferred. Desai through the novel affirms that alienation occurs not from the failure to assimilate with the host culture but from the very conditions under which assimilation is expected. Global hierarchies of power inscribe upon the host world with an expectation that the diasporic subject must endlessly engage in the translation of self which in turn culminates in the fracture of subjectivity itself. Their condition of existence corresponds to Bhabha's argument that the third space emerges precisely from cultural translation and displacement, denying the subject any opportunity to build a coherent identity (Bhabha 55). In the novel, this third space does not

synthesise their Indianness and Americanness but produces a state of constant negotiation between the two. Diasporic subjectivity is forged through dissonance revealing how liminality can produce alienation rather than coherence. *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* by Kiran Desai thus exposes diasporic alienation as a structural and psychic impasse in which the migrant body remains perpetually in transit, unable to fully inhabit any geographical space or feel natural and familiar within any relationship or within oneself.

References

1. Bhabha Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 1994.
2. Desai Kiran. *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*. Penguin Random House, 2025.
3. Fanon Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann, Grove Press, 1967.
4. Laing RD. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1960.
5. Said Edward W. *Orientalism*. Penguin Classics, 2003.
6. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel Estella Barnes, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2003.