

Review

Suffering, Struggle and Soliloquy: A Postmodernist Reading of Krishna Baldev Vaid's *None Other*

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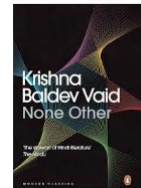
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Editor's Note:

Krishna Baldev Vaid's None Other occupies an unusual position in Indian literary fiction, being intensely interior, resistant to plot, and unrelenting in its meditation on meaninglessness. This essay situates the novella within a postmodernist framework, reading its fragmented soliloquy as a formal enactment of the existential crisis it describes.

Vaid, Krishna Baldev.
None Other.
Penguin Random, 1992
ISBN: 978-9386495020



Postmodernism, a socio-cultural-philosophical movement deals with the recurrence of parody, pastiche, metanarrative and instead of the grand narratives it celebrates "small"/metanarratives or voices. In this era, it is assumed that God is dead so does the reason, meaning, truth, law and order. In the fluid structure of existence, there occurs the blending of opposing ideas, contradictory thoughts resulting in an oxymoronic state. This era does not believe in the 'truth' causing the emergence and existence of falsehood.

Krishna Baldev Vaid's novella *None Other* (1992) depicts the meaninglessness of reality by focusing on the existential crisis of human life. The sole protagonist is a nameless entity who suffers from old age and disease and writes down his agony. The entire novella turns out to be his intense soliloquy on pain and meaninglessness. Here, the author projects his multiple selves, distorted thoughts that celebrate plurality. There is no proper characterization as well as plot construction. The world is

doomed and apocalyptic. He becomes a (post)modern man who reflects on the disorganised society. The tone of the book is philosophical and meditative that makes the novella a postmodernist utterance on human struggle. This text is a saga of a conflicted mind depicting his fragmented ideas and personality. The book reads like a meditative rhapsody on pain, struggle and suffering. Life is absurd and the constant search for purpose in this meaningless world is a daunting task. In the text, the protagonist attempts to look for meaning which he miserably fails to find and locate. His failure to discover a finite resolution or conclusion makes his life unbearable and stagnant. Like the tramps of Beckett, the protagonist encounters silence, pauses and maintains a non-verbally communication with himself. His aloneness in this world intensifies the miserable tragedy of existence. He pours out his heart; stares at his suffering in this cruel world with his subjective view and often romanticises the pain of his life. The name of the text is symbolic as it means nobody. It echoes the sentiments of Beckett's philosophy. Vaid through his character represents the nonsensical temperament of life and transforms the text into an absurdist literature. In this text, the readers can find the reference of other texts, intertextuality, metanarrative resulting in the culmination of unpredictable storytelling and open ended meaning. Therefore, the lack of any singular narrative or meaning of the deficiency of any solid plot construction makes this text postmodern in nature.

Vaid's *None Other* alludes to T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" (1922), "I am a doddering old fool, an outcast, an exile, a solitary-outwardly scarred and inwardly bruised; friendless- who has wasted the better part of his blasted life in this alien arctic wasteland..." (35). It is a metanarrative that echoes the themes of nothingness and existential crisis reflected in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954). Soliloquy is a long speech where a character delivers the dialogues to himself/ herself without intending to involve others. It is different from internal monologue as the internal monologue can be 'heard' by the others. Apart from being the saga of an old man's suffering, pain, loneliness and memory, it becomes a melodious contemplation on nihilism and absurdity of human existence. The soliloquy of the old man finds a direct

resemblance with the utterances of the old man of Eliot's "Gerontion" (1920),

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.¹

Through the metaphorical title, the writer tries to depict how lonely human existence can be. The loneliness is so acute that the protagonist continues his interior monologue. He has no other to talk to. He is in deep sorrow and curses his existence. Throughout the novella, nothing interesting happens. No action happens except the psychological misfortune and emotional turmoil. There is no proper movement or physical action represented in the text. It is all about the passing thoughts of the protagonist. The sentences are long and reflecting the psychological wounds. This text here also echoes Eliot, due to the disillusionment and lack of spiritual faith of the protagonist:

I wouldn't have been able to continue to crumble and endure my death, in this monstrous house, in this alien wasteland. I am caressing my own back now. I shall feel embarrassed. I am beginning to be. There is no one to witness it. Except of course that devil. Who, for all I can see, is still around. Invisible or otherwise. But he doesn't count. Even so, the very thought of his presence is enough to extinguish me. In a split second. At least for a while. For nothing but nothing can extinguish me permanently. (107-08)

The writer has translated his own work from Hindi language bridging the gap between autobiography and biography. This novella appears to be a thorough record of spontaneous 'emotion recollected in tranquility' and beautifully turns out to be more than a raw informative diary. This book is a melancholic poetry. It appears to be a confessional art like the poems of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Sometimes, he romanticises his alienation and pain. Sometimes, he takes an anti-romantic stand to outdo his excessive reflection and meditation on life. He looks at the process of living as a curse, a mistake that cannot be rectified. In

¹ Eliot, T. S. "Gerontion." Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47254/gerontion. Accessed 24 Dec. 2024.

this text, he is the sole character as well as the protagonist whose soliloquy turns his expression into an organic whole. While Eliot discusses the post-world war society exposing the emotional, spiritual decay, Vaid's book somehow tries to indirectly capture his trauma of partition and its dislocation. His transplantation into the 'unknown' land or the 'other' side of border/India makes him feel strange, cursed and 'foreign.' His description of the old house somehow discloses his disregard and disgust for his current state/nation, "I feel as if I am already in a state where every moan is melodious. This feeling doesn't last long, but as long as it does I feel I have lost my body and boredom" (42). His entire residence is not a home anymore. It becomes a dry house, "My house looks like a bloated monster. About to die. Or perhaps about to be resurrected" (3). The stark contrast between resurrection and death reflects his conflicted mind and wretched condition. Along with his house, he is dying- "Alone and disgruntled. In this unlively alien town" (5). It also becomes the microcosm of the entire nation which is devoid of warm sense and sensibilities and goes through sufferings after partition. Throughout his book, he maintains his subjective gaze while oscillating between the waves of subjectivities and objectivities. His languages are fragmented and are written without proper punctuation making the thoughts incomprehensible.

Memory is the tool that he uses to record his feelings which is gloomy and dark. The constant duality of optimism and pessimism marks his novella. He has tried to recall his attachment with wife and children but doubts about their existence or non-existence. Sometimes, he nurtures the thoughts of suicide and sometimes he withdraws himself from it, "The essence of my angst. Someday, I mean certainly before the end, I will destroy all my books and notebooks. It will take some time...All consumed by the same bonfire! An attractive idea!" (28). He welcomes his conflicted ideas and at the same time, tries to discard them. He wants to be free from the pangs of suffering but finds no solution, "I want to break off all my limbs, one by one, and cast them away, one by one, as I soar" (124). His suffering sticks to him like a chronic malady whose medicine has not been invented till date,

I don't want to waste the rest of my life in moans. I want to breathe my last, not moaning or screaming, but laughing, absurdly, so that, if anyone should care to recall my last face after I'm gone, he should see a toothless old child, his eyes closed, his mouth open-emitting light. (34)

The child is the symbol of innocence whereas old age signifies experience and maturity. He wants to keep his 'youth' alive. He wants to die yet he wants to live. This antithetical thought distorts his peace and stability. His only companion is his notebooks where he pens down everything- "Writing should no longer be a temptation for me, but it is, perhaps because of the torment that it also is" (79). He says that he remembers everything and forgets nothing. The dilemma of everything and nothing makes him confused and bored. His notebooks turn out to be his diary like Anne Frank's kitty where she tries to mirror the trauma, memory and experiences of World War and holocaust. How far does one's own diary/recording act as an authenticate source of information? The writer Vaid writes the lyrical biography of the confined old man and his vulnerabilities by unconsciously making his novella stand on the division between fiction and reality. Is the writer showcasing his own wretched condition? Who is this old man? Is this the author himself? The old man's mind is impregnated with these questions and contradictions:

But I am recording all this here? For whom? I need to raise these questions every now and then. In order to be able to rake my memories. In order to be able to suppress them. Otherwise, I would be forever lost in the jungle of my past. (39)

These are the raw confession of the old man who dives into the narrative of stream of consciousness mode. He has no control over his thoughts. His confession comes out like an epiphany:

I am different from other alienated old people of my age; or at least I think I am; I want to suffer according to my own system...I am in my moan-room, on my knees, behind a closed window that opens on the

street, like a sinner about to pray. Underneath my knees are two cushions. In front of me is a low stool on which sits this notebook in which I am recording all this. (122)

The old man henceforth curses his old age and weakness by saying:

Unlike other old people, I have no phlegm in my system, so I can't just spit something out and feel a little relief...Most of my old friends have died; the rest must have been devoured by space and time. I like to think of them as depraved victims of malevolent cosmic forces. (29)

In addition to this, the readers can find the long silences, pauses as words fail to utter truth and meaning. Thus, his novella transforms itself to be a postmodern text. His existence metaphorically becomes an existence of an alienated postmodern man as there is no purpose, no meaning, no truth except suffering like Sisyphus. It may refer to his post-partition days where Godot never arrives. He utters, "For my real aim now is not to arrive anywhere, but to have a premonition of the process and futility of arriving, and of not arriving, anywhere. The freedom to end without illusions" (95). Godot happens to be the symbol of hope, youth, vitality and joy. Here, the novella is plagued with the malady of unforgettable trauma and memory of pain. The protagonist has no name as a name gives one an identity. His nameless condition depicts his shapeless identity. His pain is psychological as well as physical. He focuses on body, body parts and paints the picture of those diseased limbs. He compares himself with a "wounded crow" (71). His suffering makes him an ugly being, "Between my legs hangs my poor penis. By its balls, whenever my eyes meet its eyes, I stop writing and begin to feel sorry for its forlorn state" (103).

The title of the book is also symbolic as it represents no-one. It is the book about this particular old man and his expressionistic tales of miseries. Therefore, there is no one to share his struggle with- "There is none other! I remember the

tune. I've lost the rest of the words. I think I'll interrupt myself and hum this tune for the rest of the day. There is none other!" (27). The novella has no proper beginning, ending, plot development, and characterization. It is a pure song of boredom and resilience. Living seems to be a burden to him that cannot be erased. There is a sense of endurance in it, "I had to endure time. I mean I have to. Time is the only inescapable torment. This is a tattered truth. All truths are tattered. I can't fly beyond tattered truth on the wings of tattered truths. Perhaps this is my only pain" (218). He not only encounters with the suffering, he but also bears the pain of agony. The silences show his inability to frame his thoughts and find suitable words causing the collapse of verbal communication- "Silence is the only way out of this swamp." (70) The break and silence echo the empty silences of Harold Pinter. He is in constant dialogues with his multiple selves and there is an on-going battle with him (self). Therefore, the readers have to believe in his confessions positing themselves on the verge of doubt, uncertainty and counter-question. It erases his identity of man as a singular entity and transforms himself into a pastiche of different voices.

This is a poetic novella on noise and cacophony. The old man fails to make a symphony out of it. It can be argued that the old man is the surrogate voice of the author who meditates on postmodern existence. Therefore, it generates questions on the concept of authorship. It also raises question: Who are the readers? For whom, is he writing down his expressionistic emotions? The novella ends with an open conclusion leaving a space blank for the readers to interpret it in their own way- is it an autobiography of the author himself? Is it his confession on life and struggle? Is it his own soliloquy as he is alone on the present stage of his life, "As long as one is alive, one cannot rise above the basic animal needs- food, sex, pain and shelter; the extent and intensity of these needs can be reduced but never denied" (121). Nobody knows the answer including the old man, "I am a part of nothing. The nothing I see has no parts" (205). The book is open to the readers as the novella is inconclusive in its nature. It celebrates the plurality of the old man's voices which often clash with each other. For this reason, he becomes a

postmodern man and his novella becomes a postmodern soliloquy on the mandatory co-existence of life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, peace and void, family and alienation, matter and mind, heaven and Hades, noise and music, darkness and light.

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Eliot, T. S. "Gerontion." Poetry Foundation,

www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47254/gerontion. Accessed 25 Feb. 2026.