

# Nirvāna Beckoning: The Sacred, the Profane, and the Sublime in *Kārma Cola*

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**Abstract** The present study is an exploration of the concept of transcendence in *Karma Cola* by Gita Mehta. It is a deconstructive investigation aimed at delegitimizing and destabilizing the grand narrative of the innate nature of the human self as it operates within the framework of a discourse that generates, operates, disseminates and manages myths about eastern spiritual tradition. The theoretical tool for illustrating the insincerity of the notion of self-actualisation and the consequential *Angst* is, for the present study, existentialism.

**Key words** *Transcendence; Existentialism; Self; East; West;*

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## Introduction

With the advent of colonialism, knowledge and awareness about Indian culture and spiritual legacy started hitting the shores of America and Europe, though partially.

Consequently, the concerned Western psyche started developing images, figures, character types, and story patterns that are universally shared by people across cultures in the Occidental social system. This stereotyping was embedded deep in the “collective unconscious” of the West and involved racial memories of situations, events, and relations that have been part of the Western practice from that point in time. Thereafter, coming under the influence of transcendental philosophy, the teachings of different gurus, lectures on the “*sanatan dharma*” and several books with the message of India, the Westerners started forming the myth that India is “the” answer to their existential crisis as they perceive India as the land of mysticism and spirituality, waiting to be explored to the core. This gave birth to another dream that if they could learn so much about Indian spiritual culture staying in a completely different social context, reaching India would provide them with “instant” *Nirvana*.

They not only manifested themselves in the subconscious material of dreams but were also persistently expressed in the more consciously constructed material of myths and literature. In the process of this formation of a *thematic* about the “magical” India, when a westerner recounts a narrative based on such unconscious memories, the listener’s existential mind is subconsciously stirred, producing a singularly powerful psychological effect because the memories evoke primordial feelings, concerns, and responses that cannot be logically explained. In this regard, the archetype of India in the Occidental mind can be a parallel to the Saussurian concept of *langue*, which is a set of impersonal rules and conventions, ideas and canons; *langue* is transindividual and abstract, hence the guiding force behind all individual reactions generated from a tangential perspective. Saussure’s mention of “all individuals” should be taken to refer to all individuals within a particular community sharing the identical conventions and customs.

The clouded vision or the tangential perspective of the Western psyche is fragmented into innumerable number of *paroles* resulting in the formation of the problematic in this context. According to Althusser the concept of problematic is “to designate the particular unity of a theoretical formation and hence the location to be assigned to this specific difference” (Althusser 32). Although Althusser assigned the term to theoretical formations it is often used to designate ideological ones as well; any complex of beliefs which (whatever their implicit or explicit contradictions) hangs together in a self supporting unity may be referred to as a problematic. The term can be used in a way that makes it appear similar to Foucault’s concept of the *episteme*; in as much as it may be believed that a particular problematic represents what is “thinkable” for those in its grip. The epistemological knowledge emerging out of the myth about mystic India empowers the Western ethics to have a go at

the spiritual legacy of the Orient and assimilate it in their own knowledge system without even considering the nuances of this complex esoteric tradition of Indian origin.

In this regard we should also mention Kuhn, who suggested that particular learned communities rested upon acceptance of “a set of recurrent and quasi-standard illustrations of various theories in their conceptual, observational, and instrumental applications.” These, he proposed, are the community’s *paradigms*, which can be found revealed in its “textbooks, lectures, and laboratory exercises” (Kuhn 43), as well as in the *thematic*. Kuhn’s paradigms are not just the illustrations (the thematic) he mentions but also the assumptions (the problematic) which are to be found behind, and constituted by, these illustrations. In other words, the paradigm of the western world about spiritual India is constituted by a set of beliefs and ideas which both enables and constraints their thought process; a framework or scaffold which can underpin or support further progress but which of necessity includes and also excludes a range of possibilities, increasing the angst of the Occidental existential mind. The necessity for a *paradigm shift* to enable major advances in theory and thought to take place seemed to have something in common with the need for the Westerners to move from mere mythical ideas to experiential and linear unambiguous understanding.

As the vision about India was a smoked one, it emanated infinite possibilities and alternatives aggravating the existential “anguish” and “abandonment” for the Western mind. In this context Saussure stresses that langue is not a function of the individual; it is passively assimilated by the individual and does not require premeditation. Parole on the other hand, he insists, is an “individual act” which is wilful and intellectual. For example, as far as Oriental spiritual practices are concerned, *Tantra* has become a household word in certain circles in the West. But, as is often the case with household words, popularity does not necessarily imply understanding. Similarly, *Tantra* has captured the fascination of a good many Westerners who equated *Tantric* life with existential living, but few of them actually know what it stands for, including some of those who profess to practice, teach, or write about it. Therefore, George Feuerstein aptly points out that, “Many are attracted to Neo-tantrism because it promises sexual excitement or fulfilment while clothing purely genital impulses or neurotic emotional needs in an aura of spirituality (Feuerstein 271).

Their main error is to confuse the spiritual bliss (*ananda, maha-sukha*) of India with ordinary orgasmic pleasure turning the sacred into the profane. These elucidations may conceivably be helpful to people looking for a more fulfilling or

entertaining sex life, but they are in most cases far removed from the true spirit of Indian spiritual legacy and attainment of *Nirvana*. In this sense they are sadly misleading, for instead of awakening a person's impulse to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, they tend to foster narcissism, self-deception, and false hopes which further accentuate the existential dilemma. The present study seeks to investigate the study of *Nirvāṇa*<sup>1</sup> (self-actualization) as it is dealt with in Gita Mehta's *Kārma Cola*; deconstructing one of the most orthodox Occidental thesis about the Orient. It also seeks to ascertain Existentialism as a convincing tool for interrogating the preferences that instruct the common knowledge systems within the area.

### Myth and Demythologization

Levi-Strauss observes that, "Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message" (Strauss 109), it is "depoliticized speech" (Strauss 142). Therefore, a myth is an imaginative extension of the lived experience of a specific socio-cultural section within a certain spacio-temporality. For Bultman, the purpose of myths is to shroud the truth that they intend to express through linguistic signification. He argues that the significance of a myth lies in its expression of a human reality rather than something beyond it. However, Heidegger's influence was so heavy on Bultman, that he starts studying the practice of myths from an existential point of view; he says, "Myth should not be interpreted cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better, still existentially" (Bultman 10).

When mythological understandings within the framework of a society are seriously re-considered in order to recognize the deeper layers of socio-cultural-political significance that lead to their formation, demythologization certainly becomes a deconstructive process. "Myths perform an ideological FUNCTION while ideologies function by means of myths" (Hawthorne 222). It is through this continuous action within the functions of the society that myths tend to go even deeper by means of what can be called the method of "Ideological Sedimentation."<sup>2</sup> As Lugowski points out myths engage, "a view of the world as a form of timeless, static existence" (Lugowski 42). This also reminds us of Barthe's claim of myth as a

1 Also called *Nibbāna*, the word actually means "blowing out." It denotes the state of the complete erasure (blowing out) of one's ego that covers or hides one's true self, shorn of all illusions and misapprehensions, thus, revealing the true nature of reality. It is therefore, the state where one achieves self-actualisation (the actuality of one's self without the ego).

2 The word sediment comes from the root "sedere" which means "to settle or sit." In this instance the phrase is used to refer to the discursive process of ideas, concepts and conventions that settle within the psyche and thus, function as ideological precepts that inform the formation and maintenance of knowledge systems that are unchallenged within the body-politic of a culture.

sort of general sense or “what goes without saying” (Barthes 11). Myth, for Barthes, thus carries out a conforming role whereby a culture conceptualizes itself and the world around becomes undeviating and predetermined, and any departure from the norm is considered illegitimate and unnatural. Hayden White thus mentions that, “Myth is a form of discourse” (White 2000). Disassembling the rhetorical structure of the perception of myth and inquiring the postulation of a subject point of view, that is deduced out of inclinations and privileged belief that characterize subjective experience about a rigid object, is the fundamental concern of demythologization.

### **Existentialism and Nirvāṇa**

Critics differ widely regarding the meaning of existentialism. Some point out that in its basic form existentialism is a rational approach and critique to the understanding of absurdity, a sense of meaninglessness. It thus, necessitates a consequent search for purposelessness. There is an underlying anxiety about the ways of the world and the tactics one employs to negotiate one’s place in it. This sense of weariness is aptly described by Buber as “shuddering at the alienation between the I and the world” (Buber).

One of the most virulent critics of human affairs, Nietzsche, points out, in a sombre note that in its basic form humanity is marked with melancholy or *Angst*. While man sees into life he also sees into anguish (Nietzsche 269). This general gloom emanates from a crucial split between the self and the material world. As the individual subject perceives the physical objective world he also participates in it. He gradually becomes *it*. It, thus, tends towards an “openness to [...] suffering of life and is accomplished through a clearing away of concealment and obscurities....” (Heidegger 167).

*Angst*, for the existentialist is the most profound reality. It, however, is not unsolvable. For the existentialist *angst* is a form of disorder. Since men feel this disorder very deeply, there ought to be, arguably, a structure of order within the individual. *Angst*, therefore, is a by-product of the conflict between internal order and the superficial forms which have been imposed upon it (Fowler 81).

There is a mystical tradition, especially of the Orient, which states that the individualized “Being” is the all-encompassing consciousness, the *Umgreifende*. In that line of thinking if one contemplates on Sartre a surprising element comes out. Sartre once famously opined “existence precedes essence” (quoted in Fowler 82). Now, this could mean firstly that being or existence is *essentially* meaningless and human experience renders meaning to it. Secondly, it points out to a more deterministic view of life, where meaning for each of us is definite and lying

dormant unless it unfolds as the individual's fate. In either case the individual's attempt is "to overcome the [...] fissure in favour of a complete oneness of subject and object through the disappearance of objectivity and the extinction of the ego" (Cooper 82). This leads to what we may refer to as the search of the sublime, the most fundamental nature of life. It, thus, becomes the quest for self-actualisation or *Nirvāna*. Here, the boundaries between the self and its environment are broken down and a pattern of harmony emerges. The persistent problem, however, is that the relationship between the subject (individual) and the object (the physical world) is that of an apparent signifier-signified one. The signifiers that create the world around us are a "complex of cerebralized structures which impede communication and give only limited control over the empirical world" (Fowler 81). The mind of man is convoluted and cornered with(in) this mesh of "[...]groundlessness, futility and grey opacity" (Fowler 81). This experience is the *neant*. A thorough understanding of it can lead one to transcend it eventually. The process as Marcel aptly puts it is achievable through "secondary reflection"; an approach characterized by "wonder and astonishment" (quoted in Macquarrie 110).

This sense of wonder is especially appealing to the West. In a vicious attack on the western man's incessant quest of material excess Ferry points out "Its impressive train of stars and spangles, its culture of servility in face of the powerful, and its immoderate love of money tend to present daydreams as a model for life" (Ferry 14). The quest is based on the notion of self-gratification through a "transcendental signified" (Derrida 65), a vision where pleasure and success create something apart from the individual self, something outside it, something out there waiting to be possessed and enjoyed.

When the possession is unachievable or when it is unsatisfactory then in its desperation the mind creates a Utopia, "a beyond." The Utopia necessarily entails flight; escape. Naturally, the flight is from the materially exhausting to the spiritually exalting; an exact opposite; in this case, from the West to the East; from a metaphorical sunset to a new sunrise. The object is to dissolve suffering without investing much in understanding it.

It is with such intentions that toward the end of the nineteenth century the West accepted the East as its newfound spiritual spa and India as the destination offering the best and the most advanced treatments to inner issues. Numerous exoduses happened over the course of several decades into India from the West, not with intentions previously known to the native; that of pillage and plunder; but of seeking retreat in the indigenous science of Yoga and Ayurveda. It created a spectacle of surrealist cacophony starting with the stars of the West, the Beatles, prostrating at

the feet of Maharshi Mahesh Yogi. After that it was open season. The west being overrun by counter-culture groups, entire villages transforming into orgasmic wonderlands by hippies, free sex running haywire over vast spaces of land and mind and so on. Though unconventional this was not unnatural. The flight of the eagle, thrown off its own perch, had taken it to an arcadia that lay on eastern shores. There it sought the freedom it long desired but never deserved, for it was enmeshed in the “myth of success.” The predicament was that it had in the same vein mythologized *Nirvāṇa* as some “thing” “out-there-beyond-the-Indian Ocean”; a discourse in time.

On the formulation of discourse Foucault states, “[w]henver one can describe, between a number of statements [...] a regularity [...] we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a *discursive formation*...” (Foucault 38). These discursive formations create “disciplines and institutions which, in turn, sustain and distribute those discourses” (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 57). Sustainance of a discourse necessitates regularisation of the same. In studying the formation of a discourse on the myth of *Nirvāṇa* one has to deal with underlying concepts that segregate individual subject positions and define what can be said about it. It originated as an *a priori* philosophical position: that the Orient could grant *Nirvāṇa* as a readymade cure. This philosophical assumption became common sense as a metanarrative and thus incontrovertible. This inclination towards generalization and formation of psychological metanarratives is referred to by Edward Said<sup>1</sup> as the “specialist argument” (Said 13-14) which “can work quite effectively to block the larger and [...] the more intellectually serious perspective” (Said 13-14). According to Said metanarratives work as mass hallucinogens that dominate the collective unconscious through the politics of representation. The object which is an “Other” of the subject is devoid of the agency to represent itself by the dominant subject. The object is thus, characterize as a monolithic unit of reality, an illustration perceived by the subject. Said points out that these representations of the Other transform, in course of time, into knowledge systems that condition perception and infiltrate culture at large. In this study we would like to submit is that the discourse of *Nirvāṇa* emanates from a supposed “otherness” of Eastern cultures (especially Indian) as intrinsically *mystical, mythological, magical*. The West presupposes that such mystical cultures offer *Nirvāṇa* readily. Until such an ideology is demythologized, *Nirvāṇa* in its actuality cannot be attained. Said writes, “So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping

1 Edward. W. Said, born in 1935, was a Palestinian-American cultural and literary theorist. He propounded the theory of and coined the term “Orientalism” in his 1978 book *Orientalism*. His book has since become a landmark in the area-corpus of postcolonial studies and the experience of marginality.

have intensified the [...] imaginative demonology of “the mysterious Orient” (Said 26).

### **The Text and the Analysis**

The text in question, *Karma Cola*, is an intensive look into the paradigm of *Nirvāna* as it plays out in the western mind and the eastern landscape. “*Karma Cola* enfolds the cultural transition that was taking place in India due to the influx of beatniks and hippies in the late 1960s” (Singh, 243). The author presents a journalistic account of how spiritual seeking can turn noisy with odd ramifications. There is lacking, in the text, a particular authorial voice. There are scenes which the author presents before the reader like a documentary. The scenes or incidents are, however, connected with a thread of thematic commonality, one which has been mentioned in sections above and will be investigated in sections hence.

The West was marked with a deep sense of material excess and vulnerability. It was ruled by the absence of a purpose within oneself. There was, for all intents and purposes, a profound hankering after some “thing” that will answer the ultimate question: is there something beyond the profanity of this mundane existence, something that was not marred by the sins of man? There was a desire to break free from the constraints of the 1950s orthodoxy and to create a more inclusive and tolerant landscape” (Singh, 243). For our analysis we have taken sections or scenes arbitrarily but they are, nonetheless woven around similar lines of thematic problems, as is the text in general.

In interrogating such questions we come across, in the text, a Brazilian who remarks “Come tonight. Moon is full. Kārma is right for looking at jewels” (Mehta 3). The banality of the statement nakedly exposes the misunderstanding of all the basic concepts of Eastern mystical traditions for example Karma. Therefore, “Spirituality as a commodity is much discussed and debated in the book” (Singh, 244). It leads the author to ironically remark, “[p]eople were taking their gurus where they could find them” (Mehta 3). There is desperation in the voice of the Brazilian, a lack of foundation at the core of one’s self. In desperation, one sought refuge; in this case; in make-belief gurus. Sartre stated once, “Nothingness is coiled in the heart of Being” (Howells 1992). The Brazilian is an embodiment of all that is wrong in the viral quest for transcendence. The individual detached from his immediate world, becomes crudely aware of the reified fragments of signification we mentioned earlier. The individual’s identity feels ungrounded. Stripped off of one’s identity the individual begs for purpose of one’s *being*. The rising anxiety in the individual mind, in a way, forced one into imitative fantasies, into a different

narrative of self-understanding, and into the quest for the “encompassing.” A little further in we come across an American who remarks, “The fact is I didn’t really come here to get here. I sort of drifted here to get away from there” (Mehta 64).

The irony of drifting like a leaf in autumn breeze raises certain crucial points to ponder on. Evidently, the American would have drifted along with the counter-culture movement taking over the West. “Influenced by the Beat movement and “low cultures” this youth movement rejected the established norms and criticised middle class values, championed sexual emancipation and promoted drugs such as marijuana and LSD to explore alternate states of consciousness” (Singh, 243). Also, the opposition of “there” and “here” is distinct. It is a getting away, an escape, a flight. Speaking existentially, the expedition of *Nirvāṇa* (what is) “must begin from the subjective” (Sartre 348), and that is where the trouble is. In the text the author (primarily situated in the position of a third person observer and narrator) narrates a letter she receives from a young American woman who had gone through a traumatic experience of drug peddling and sexual abuse. The letter concludes: “[...] I realized I should never have trusted Gurus who wore Adidas running shoes” (Mehta 9-10). This is a classic example of the “specialist argument.” The American girl falls for the discourse transcendence and applies it uncritically. Her argument is that true gurus should *not* wear Addidas running shoes. This means that she has, in her mind, the image of what a true guru might look like. It, thus, follows an aesthetic of narration and of creating the “otherness” of the Other. It subsequently marks the discursive characteristics, as images.

Althusser points out that an ideological position “*hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of the subject” (Althusser 162). This means that subjective-conscience or the self of an individual is a result of ideas that operate at the level of culture and accepted facts. The operator of a phone-line is asked by the member of an American party, “Hello, India, my party is saying you have the Big Zero” (Mehta 6). The American party’s enthusiasm about India having the Big Zero or Śūnyatā—which is another way of referring to *Nirvāṇa*—is primarily an Oriental myth; that is to say that the very act of moving toward a tangible goal for “holism” is also an encrustation of the anxiety that comes about at not being able to reach it. The western seeker as the subject distances oneself as he “thinks on the thought-of,” thereby creating an axiom of a conflict between the self and its Other, between the individual and nature, between the “here” and the “beyond.” Therefore we may posit that, if myth formation begins with the individual, demythologization begins at the exact same place. As Foucault points out, “a matter of depriving the subject [...] of its role as the originator, and of analyzing the subject

as a variable and complex function of discourse” (Foucault 158). The “I” is “not something given but comes to exist as that which is addressed by and relates to others” (Derrida 33). Therefore, as Sartre points out, knowledge of the “self” as a subject entails “responsibility [...] for all men” (Sartre 350). What the “self” is becomes clear shunned of all myths and misappropriations, as based in the subjective experience of the individual. Demythologization is thus an existential process.

In the text the devotees at Svāmī Muktananda’s camp, stuffed into tents (most of them having spent luxurious lives) “sat in meditation and expectation” (Mehta 14) of gaining *Nirvāna*. The seekers rejoiced with pleasure “when the image of the teacher appeared [...] straining to pull the energy off the screen and into themselves” (Mehta 14). The dominant experience of the West was also the universal one i.e. the myth of self-actualisation was subconsciously premeditated for its participants. The “mysterious Orient,” its divinity had gripped the West “[...] who had just hit town, restless to start the long journey to the heart of spiritual India” (Mehta 15). Modernity itself (re)produces tradition (Ivekovic 79). The heaviness of the Orientalist discourse is inferred from the statement of an enthusiastic Western traveller when he says, “It’s how I always dreamed India would be” (Mehta 16). From a prejudiced viewpoint, this statement exhibits the exact opposite of what subjectivity necessitates i.e. “man is responsible for what he is” (Sartre 349) which further signifies that as a conscious and thinking subject one is able to look beyond the opaque screen of spiritual tradition that one either inherits inadvertently or espouses because it is quite opportune and accessible. The conscious effort to know “what is” and ensuing disenchantment of the Occidental explorer into Eastern lands stems from the very act of trying to re-cognize what is already apparently comprehended through conventional image of the unfathomable Other. The persistent problematic in the quest was of course, as the existentialist points out, the unanswered issue of the subject. An American says that the advice of a guru like figure (an old man with a beard)—“Be careful how you laugh. You become what you laugh at” (Mehta 20)—scared him. He is speculative that his laughter is a tool of transformation; that within act of laughter was access to the *beyond*. Furthermore the American is (mis)guided by the idea that his self was not his and that he had not *become*. This split from what one thought one was initiates the existential angst that perpetuates itself through discursive formations of “actualising the self” i.e. “making *It* what it was.”

In eastern spiritual traditions, especially in India there was a profound practice where a question asks itself and the answer replies itself. Like when the Westerner asked the most vital question, “Who am I,” the answers were vague in the least like

“What is the question.” Real masters, however, asked in reply “Who is asking the question.” Those from the West was obviously baffled because they could not realize that until they let go of their internal structures of perspectives, spirituality, as they sought, would remain off limits. At one juncture Gita Mehta aptly opines, “There is that difference between being kicked in the teeth and reading a description of being kicked in the teeth. Some call it existential” (Mehta 36). They supposed that sitting for extended periods in the lotus position would get them through with this intricacy of accessibility; another case of what we would call their “tangential perspective”<sup>1</sup>. The existential concerns of the West were so immediate that they thought remedies to such problems would also be immediate. In such adversity and with such a limited foresight they rushed to India expecting to attain *Nirvāṇa*. The primary problem for the American, the European and others was their dependence on logic. Discovery of the “self” was, for them an enterprise in ratiocination. The “beyond,” however, lay *beyond reason*. Thus, one from the Occident sank into the abyss of discovering the true “self.” “The bad-tempered old gents who lived in the jungles of India several thousand years ago and came up with the *Upanishads* were well aware of the dangers of trying to take on what you aren’t up to handling” (Mehta 35).

Of course the search for endless freedom transmuted itself in the search for immortality. *Nirvāṇa*, thus became synonymous with unending life. In the text, in spite of the demise of one of the followers, others continue to believe that the *guru* had the power to drive away death. It was a gross myth which, it might be said had its roots in Abrahamic traditions, with its lure of life in heaven after one’s demise. The sages of the East, however, pointed out that what is constant under all circumstances can effectively be said to be immortal. Since that cannot be claimed of the physical body, there ought to be something that is. That they referred to as the cosmic “Self,” *Brahman* or *Ātman*<sup>2</sup>. The sages embark on a venture to augment their skills required to achieve this understanding. Six different methods were developed for this purpose, and they are called *Yoga*<sup>3</sup>. *Yoga* profess that in order to reach *Ātman* one has to tear apart the superficial layers of body and mind, the mind must

1 The phrase is used here to refer to the skewed perspective of the Occident about Oriental traditions which is devoid of the total picture, because of the preconceptions, predetermination that inform their concepts about Eastern (especially Indian) spiritual practices.

2 Literally meaning “breath” the word refers to the quintessence of an individual’s being. In Eastern metaphysics it denotes the real self of a being which is the same as the supreme self or *Brahman*.

3 *Yoga* literally means “to join, to add or to unite.” It refers to the practice whereby one is united with one’s *Ātman*, which is the supreme being or *Brahman* itself. The individual who through *Yoga* achieves liberation is thus called a *Yogi*, and not someone who can just perform certain types of physical exercises.

be calm, without duality and unwavering. It is the state for perceiving the *Brahman*. Those who sought this state called *Nirvāna* did not realize this. Driven by angst the mind of the westerner wavered looking for pain-killers and ending up with multiple aphrodisiacs to soothe their heartaches. They wanted to reach “the promised land” but took vehicles which went afar from their intended destination. The Westerner did not understand, for good measure, that the “[...] the Oriental ability to see in a plethora of contradictions a literally mind-blowing affirmation” (Mehta.35). Consequently, the Western mind conceptualized grave ideas like immortality and infinity with respect to a corporeal way of life. This chaotic situation was further aggravated when the phony gurus misled them on their journey towards self discovery and contributed in forming a skewed perception of eternity and *Brahman*. They burnt up the process of their own self-actualisation in order to exalt their consumption of Indian spiritual mystery. Here one might quote Descartes who said “Conquer yourself rather than the world,” meaning one can act without resorting to hope. What was problematic was “[t]o go from the monomania of the West to the multomania of the East ....” (Mehta 35).

An American meteorologist, while answering a fellow American student’s question says: “Don’t live in the shadow of the death, young man,” he warned. “Let us say there is nuclear holocaust. What will it do? I shall tell you what it will do. It will cleanse the world.” Don’t you understand? We are going towards a post-nuclear, post-Armageddon Golden Age!” (Mehta 17) The American student, baffled and confused because the scientist had confounded peace for annihilation. It was because nothingness was misconstrued as nihilism. The student’s existential question was not answered. In the text the World Conference on the Future of Mankind is organized at *Vijñāna Bhawan*. Globalisation and free markets took over the existing culture as a combination of various religious systems and the *Kārma* concept the Hippies popularized. The up-market hoteliers pursued divergent interests while the Hippies soaked in drugs and sexual depravity. The World Conference was just one of many platforms made use of for *selling* India to the world as was in the brochure of the Pacific Area Travel Association. The venue gave them a seal of authenticity and “establishment seriousness.” At a retreat of Svāmī Mukṭānanda, a few kilometres away, everyone was busy in the seminar on awakening the *Kuṇḍalinī*<sup>1</sup>. His devotees included an entourage of respectable

1 *Kuṇḍalinī* literally means “coiled” implying the essential energy in human beings that is believed to be “coiled” i.e. “dormant” until awakening takes place. The term was made popular for the Western audience by Sir John Woodroffe who termed it as “Serpent Power” (see Woodroffe, *The Serpent Power*, 1974). Such representations undermined the symbolism of Indian metaphysics and represented such terms in a negative or an exotic light for the Western seeker.

foreigners, eager to receive Svāmī's Śakti- the transmission of energy from the guru to the devotees. It presents before us the picture of consumption and mass appropriation. The "otherness" was not considered inaccessible anymore, but at the same time it had not turned out to be comprehensible. In his essay *Consuming India*, Graham Haggan, portrays India as a promising piece of exhibitionism and consumerism. India found itself as a consumable entity. "[...] India acquired another willing convert to the philosophy of meaningfully meaningless" (Mehta 17). Mehta points out with exactitude that "Our only acceptable coin seems to be piety, or our reputation for it, and we are spending it with the same reckless hilarity as those who pay in reason" (Mehta 19). The seekers were lost in thinking that India was "the" answer to their question. It led them to the phony *gurus* who further led them to a world of darkness and a point of no return.

We come by an episode where a young boy argues that the *guru* of that āśrama was his real father. He is baptized as a *Buddha*. The so-called seekers lack knowledge as to what it means to be a Buddha. Knowledge can be had through books but the tradition, culture and nurture of the East cannot be internalized through black and white. Said says, "The principal product of this exteriority is of course representation [...] (Said 21) that are based on absorbed mythical traditions. Thus the author says that western spiritual enthusiasts "[...] can hear with their hearts. There are no words to stand in between them and God's pure energy. They can be one with him." "Did you feel God's aura? Did you get a hit off the energy? they demanded" (Mehta 30).

The man who came to seek *Nirvāṇa* wanted to have it in parts, as were comfortable with his ideas of the East. The condition, however, that he wanted to experience was an entirety. The realm of experience is subjective in the same way abandonment is, that "we ourselves decide our being" (Sartre 357). At the metaphysical level abandonment implies a "silence of hidden Transcendence, as it emanates into experience and overcomes fragmentation, isolation and encrustation" (Fowler 81). The banality of seeking existential profoundness is demythologized when one begins to see that, "[t]he seduction lay in the chaos. They thought they were simple. We thought they were neon. They thought we were profound. We knew we were provincial. Everybody thought everybody else was ridiculously exotic and everybody got it wrong" (Mehta 5). The point, however, is that the individual was the sum total of the discourse that forms the subjective. Ivekovic writes that "the subject is born into a sense and meaning *already given*, into a scene" (Ivekovic 34). It was nearly impossible for the seeker from the West to understand the "way to be" in the East, because it was counterintuitive for them.

This unusual propensity is demythologized by Mehta when she points out that “Anjuna beach had become to the Indians what the burning *ghats* of Banaras to the foreigners, mostly a place to watch others lose their dignity” (Mehta175). Hirsch, while referring to the formation of metanarratives says that, “[...] to assume that *any* cultural environment is homogeneous, even on the very abstract level at which literary histories conducted, is to make an assumption about human communities which experience contradicts” (Hirsch 252). That, however, is what spiritual myths about the East that were created and maintained within a desperate culture, unsure of itself did. Flux and change are rendered improbable in this frame of reference in which the rigidity of a mythic discourse generates outlook. Within the existential outlook self-interrogation is an intertextual enterprise. It is “an ethic of action and self-commitment” (Sartre 360). The self of the individual is where the search for “the truth” rests. The frustrated ego, however, cannot assume the answer within itself and thus seeks something beyond itself. An encounter with Eastern philosophy of self-realisation was troublesome to say the least as, “[a] valid interpretation is one that represents an authentic realisation of meaning through one’s own perspective, or through that of one’s time and culture. That practical aim of perspectivism can be expressed in positive terms as an attempt to replace the meaningless criterion of correctness with the presumably meaningful criterion of authenticity” (Hirsch 255). In the text when a Western student is asked by the guru to meditate over his dual sexuality he moves towards homosexuality. Nuns are targeted as part of the so-called *tantric* process of salvation through sex. The gurus appreciate their self-restraint but ridicule them by saying that they were cowards as they retreated from sex without realizing how it felt like. Allured by such provocative arguments, some nuns gave into the *āśramas* where they get first-hand experience of sleeping with men. Christian men break the ultimate taboo by sleeping with a nun. They remained oblivious of the crisis that brought them to their “promised” land. “The Westerner,” thus finds “the dialectics of history less fascinating than the endless opportunities of narcissism provided by the wisdom of the East” (Mehta102). “The white clients believe that the guru has remedy to their panacea whereas the neo-sanyasis at the ashram, in order to enjoy the reputation of being the “thinking man’s guru” readily offer a variety of spiritual stimulants to their disciples” (Singh, 245). Also, since “[...] what is commonly circulated by it is not “truth” but representations” (Said 21) the existential flux remains intact because of the external viewpoint from which the Westerner tries to locate the method to “know the self.” The process of dismantling and challenging such representations, manoeuvring as community ideology, can be called demythologization. It can be interpreted, thus, that the ethics of self-

commitment that existentialism propagates depends on the realisation that one's self is not deterministic and is devoid of ideology that creates perspective. This problematic is mentioned by Hirsch when he says, "The problem is certainly a grave one. If all interpretation is constituted by the interpreter's own cultural categories, how can we possibly understand meanings that are constituted by different cultural categories?" (Hirsch 256). This is precisely the problem for the western seeker. When faced with the question of transcendence he fails to understand *Nirvāṇa* as lived-out in the East. Cultural subjectivity, however, is acquired from an innate prospective able to endorse an infinite amount of acculturated systems of categorization. The mythical discourse on *Nirvāṇa* proceeds from the capacity of all individuals to imagine himself/herself other than he/she is, to comprehend in himself/herself an "Other" human, cultural and existential possibility. The existential position thus, is, that "[t]he Other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself" (Sartre 361). Meaning does not have an existence beyond the categories through which it is created. "Every act of interpretation involves, therefore, at least two perspectives, that of the author and that of the interpreter" (Hirsch 257). For someone arriving in India, the act of interpreting *Nirvāṇa* involved an understanding of "inter-subjectivity" (Sartre 361). Sartre wants to establish that there subsists a human "universality of *condition*" (Sartre 362), and that this universal condition informs seeking of self-knowledge. Mehta clearly states that "[a] sanyasi in India is half way to being a saint, a man who has renounced the world to seek the truth, a renunciation that is social as well as physical. His vows are not significantly different from those who join monasteries in the West- dedication to poverty, chastity and if the sanyasi is a teacher, obedience" (Mehta103). The discourse of myth-formation enables representations to prosper, and Said correctly opines that, "[...] never has there been such a thing as a pure, or unconditional, Orient [...]" (Said 23).

One who seeks *Nirvāṇa* cannot do so from the viewpoint of magic. In that scenario the excursion to the East will become fruitless. The purpose of knowledge has two shades as elucidated in the text: the Orient that is representative of the land from where *Nirvāṇa* calls, and *Nirvāṇa* itself, which is contiguous apparently with the Orient. The text maintains the tautology of the far-flung subject gazing upon the enchanting object. A German mother becomes emotional while stating: "My daughter is called Rani [...] the night she was born in Goa my friend and his lady had a daughter in Los Angeles and they called her Rani. We have such close Kārma" (Mehta 100). The vision of the seeker is skewed by an assortment of myths that further aggravate the perilous condition. There was indifference in the attitude

of the *gurus* towards the believers. The matriarch of an āśrama said, “These people want toys. They are fascinated by sex and violence. So *Bhagwan* gives them games and riddles” (Mehta 38). The seekers had to live a grimy life of drifters or return to their native lands and submit themselves to treatment in mental asylums after their traumatic experience in their eastern quest for fulfilment. The perspective of the subjective-consciousness and the demythologized quest for *Nirvāna* are indistinguishable. Such a human textuality can be regarded *as* world and self, *as* the depiction of a world in relation to a self at work with other selves and engendering this representation. However, this can also be seen *in* the world and self, all mixed up in an “intertextuality” (Spivak 495-96). The text enquires the roles the concepts of discourse and demythologization play with regard to the seeker and the seeking.

### Conclusion

*Kārma Cola* examines of the existential problem of the “self” and the discourse of *Nirvāna*. It is laden with myths formed by deterministic ideas. At one point in the text the Swiss remarks that the Germans were terrifying because they went to the Himālayas and strived to be superman. Evidently it is allusion to a kind of psychotic fear of the seekers. Therefore, before accusing the corruption of the gurus, they should blame their own existential escapism. Goldberg rightly mentions that, “The ideas and practices that shape the human soul are not like spicy dish that can be altered in the kitchen with impunity. If we are careless in our adaptation, the nuanced principles of Vedanta can easily get contaminated, and the practices of Yoga can lose their efficacy (Goldberg, 24).

On one occasion when a *guru* attempted to train the seekers the idea of free love and asked them to come out off their dormant desires, they interpreted the words literally and a young girl hurried to him at one night asking him, “Take me lover! I’m yours” (Mehta 149). One *guru* goes so far as to manoeuvre the concepts given by Carl Jung and Freud thus: “There is no sin but self-loathing. The self is God. If you loathe your body, you loathe yourself. Go towards your body, go toward your desire, and then go past them. The death of desire is the birth of Atman” (Mehta 149).

The seeker from the West who wanted to fulfil his sexual fantasies read it accordingly. It happened because of their unawareness of the ethos that informs the ethic of self-doubt. What Gita Mehta presents in her journalistic study is not a post-colonial struggle between the Orient and the Occident. Neither is it an expression of the dichotomy between the esoteric East and the consumerist West. Rather, it is a study of a transaction between two halves of the globe. It is an analysis of

the transformation of India's culture along the lines of the West; the effort of the émigrés who arrive in India with their seeking and the disappointment they feel at not making it. "The Indian guru is presented as harbouring sexual proclivities, but on the whole the gurus as well as the disciples are held responsible as both in their pursuit of escapism not only indulge in corrupt practices but also destroy themselves (Singh 246).

This study addresses all of the above as well as the strife that exists between old and new points of view. In order to arrive at a synthesis, regularized knowledge systems that remain unchallenged need to be demythologized a new frontier of existential outlook needs to emerge. *Nirvāṇa* and its seeking is situated within the socio-political fabric of determination, signification and perception. Any and all effort to pursue such a course of inquiry needs a thorough understanding of the preconceptions that inform such quests and what it means to be existential.

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