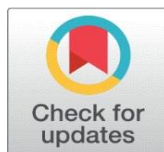
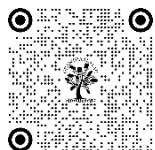


# THE WEIGHT OF BEING: EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN ANEES SALIM'S FLY HASINA, FLY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the existential crisis of Hasina, the protagonist of Anees Salim's *Fly Hasina, Fly*, whose life as a coffee vending machine attendant at an airport becomes a microcosm of late capitalist alienation. Trapped in a monotonous routine, burdened by familial obligations, and subjected to systemic abuse, Hasina's psychological deterioration reflects what philosopher Albert Camus termed "the absurd", the confrontation between human desire for meaning and the universe's indifference. Through a synthesis of existentialist philosophy of Camus, Sartre, Federici, Berlant, and trauma theory of Herman Judith, this essay argues that Hasina's suffering is not merely personal but emblematic of the subaltern woman's condition under neoliberalism. This paper explores how these forces coalesce into an existential crisis, one where Hasina's struggle is not just against poverty, but against the crushing weight of meaninglessness.

**Keywords:** Existential Crisis, Alienation, Absurd (Camusian), Meaninglessness, Monotony

## 1) INTRODUCTION

Hasina's workplace, a coffee vending machine in an airport, is more than a job; it is a metaphor for her entrapment. The coffee machine as existential prison. The airport, a transient space symbolizing freedom and mobility, becomes her purgatory. She serves caffeinated beverages to travelers embarking on journeys while she remains static, her life reduced to a series of mechanical repetitions. This paradox embodies what Jean-Paul Sartre called "bad faith", the self-deception of accepting one's oppression as inevitable.

Hasina's existence is defined by a relentless economic precarity that permeates every aspect of her life: her wages, though meager, serve as the fragile lifeline sustaining her entire family, yet her position remains perpetually unstable, teetering on the brink of dismissal at any moment. As the primary breadwinner in a household where her father's struggling secondhand clothing shop can no longer provide, her income becomes the sole barrier between her family and destitution. However, this financial dependence is a double-edged sword; her boss's constant threats of termination loom over her like a specter, weaponizing her vulnerability to enforce compliance.

The very job that keeps her family afloat also enslaves her to its demands, reducing her to a disposable cog in an impersonal economic machine. Each day, she performs the same mechanical tasks: stocking cups, dispensing coffee, counting coins, knowing that one misstep, one moment of perceived insubordination, could unravel the precarious stability she maintains. Hasina's labour is both essential and expendable, a paradox that encapsulates the neoliberal exploitation of the working poor: she is indispensable to her family's survival yet utterly replaceable in the eyes of her employer. This economic insecurity breeds a constant undercurrent of anxiety, a gnawing fear that the fragile equilibrium of her life could collapse with a single word from her boss, leaving her and her loved ones in freefall. Her precarity is not just financial but existential, it shapes her identity, limits her choices, and reinforces her entrapment in a cycle of survival with no promise of escape.

Hasina's life is further fractured by the insidious specter of gendered violence, embodied most painfully in her abusive relationship with her cousin-boyfriend Eza, a dynamic that poisons her private world while remaining invisibilized by the public sphere. This intimate tyranny operates on multiple levels: as sanctioned by familial structures that normalize cousin marriages, as enabled by economic dependence that leaves her without exit options, and as compounded by cultural expectations of female submission. The abuse transcends physical violence to encompass psychological domination, with her cousin leveraging their blood ties and future marital prospects to manipulate her into silent compliance. His control extends into her workplace, where he may monitor her interactions or demand portions of her meager wages, blurring the boundaries between domestic and economic exploitation.

What makes this violence particularly corrosive is its social sanction, the way family members might dismiss his behaviour or how community structures offer no recourse for such "private matters." Even her mother's exhibitionism during bathing rituals, witnessed by this same cousin-boyfriend, becomes a form of collateral violence, a violation of boundaries that further entrenches Hasina's powerlessness.

Hasina's suffering is compounded by profound familial betrayals that fracture the very foundation of trust and solidarity that should offer her refuge. Her mother's exhibitionist behaviour constitutes a grotesque violation of maternal protection that blurs the line between complicity and psychological violence. This disturbing exhibitionism, far from representing sexual liberation, becomes a weaponized form of humiliation that reinforces Hasina's powerlessness, as her own mother collabourates, whether consciously or not, in the erosion of her daughter's bodily autonomy and dignity.

Hasina's twin sister's unapologetic privilege, attending college while Hasina toils at the vending machine, epitomizes the cruel inequalities that can fester even within impoverished families, where limited resources and patriarchal values conspire to sacrifice one daughter's future for another's. The sister's educational advancement, made possible by Hasina's financial sacrifices, becomes a constant, galling reminder of the arbitrariness of her oppression, as the twin who shares her face but not her fate enjoys the mobility and self-determination denied to her.

Together, these familial betrayals create a domestic hellscape where the people who should offer love and protection instead become agents of Hasina's subjugation, forcing her to question whether her relentless labour and suffering have any meaning or value to those closest to her. The mother's betrayal of appropriate boundaries and the sister's betrayal of solidarity represent different but equally devastating forms of abandonment, leaving Hasina emotionally orphaned even as she continues to serve as the family's economic lifeline.

Hasina's labour at the coffee vending machine epitomizes the complete alienation of the modern service worker, her work is rendered invisible by design, her humanity erased by the very systems that depend on her exploitation. Though she stands for hours each day in the bustling airport, she exists as little more than a functional extension of the machine itself, her presence acknowledged only when the mechanism fails or a customer complains.

The repetitive, soulless nature of her tasks, pressing buttons, refilling supplies, collecting payments, reduces her to an interchangeable part in a vast economic apparatus that would replace her without hesitation, as evidenced by her boss's constant threats of termination. This disposability is compounded by relentless surveillance, whether through the watchful eye of management monitoring her productivity or the implicit judgment of hurried travelers who view her as an obstacle rather than a person. This total alienation extends to encompass what Franco Berardi calls "the soul at work", the way late capitalism doesn't just exploit her labour but colonizes her very capacity for attention, emotion, and connection, leaving her spiritually depleted even as her body continues to perform its mechanical routines.

Hasina's existence mirrors the absurdist torment of Camus' Sisyphus, condemned to an eternity of futile labour, each day at the coffee vending machine is a grotesque reenactment of the same meaningless routine, a purgatorial cycle where the faces of passengers blur into an indistinguishable mass, their orders (a black coffee, a sweetened latte) become interchangeable mantras of demand, and the humiliations (the snapped fingers, the rolled eyes, the coins tossed rather

than placed in her palm) accumulate into a kind of existential tinnitus, always ringing in the background of her consciousness. Like Sisyphus pushing his boulder uphill only to watch it roll back down, Hasina's labour produces no lasting meaning or progress, the machine empties and refills in endless repetition, the coffee grounds she discards at closing time are replaced by identical ones each morning, and her paycheck evaporates into family expenses before she can even contemplate saving. Hallucinations is all she is left with:

In these daydreams, I circled the plane two times over the airport - I thought it was customary to do so - and then headed for my destination. Once again, it was my favourite time, the time for announcements. All passengers, you can now untie your belts and sit back. The most testing part is over. When I flew over the city, clouds came racing from the opposite direction and crowded the windscreen, obscuring my view. I switched on the wipers, and they waved away the fluffy back into view. clouds, bringing the wide skies, the buildings and the fields back into view. (Salim 44)

The cruel irony of her twin sister's college education that other self who shares her genetic blueprint but inhabits a radically different life trajectory, throws into sharp relief the utter absence of upward mobility in Hasina's world; while her sister's mind expands through textbooks and lectures, Hasina's atrophies through the mind-numbing liturgy of button presses and inventory counts. This stasis is what Lauren Berlant identifies as "cruel optimism," the self-perpetuating trap of investing hope in a system structurally designed to thwart that hope, Hasina clings to her job not because it offers any real promise of liberation, but because the terrifying void of its absence is even more unthinkable.

The airport, that glittering monument to movement and escape, becomes the perfect metaphor for her entrapment: she is surrounded by the spectacle of others' mobility (the boarding passes, the departure boards flipping destinations, the suitcases wheeled toward adventures) while remaining forever fixed in place, a human fixture as static as the vending machine itself. Even her fantasies of escape those fleeting moments where she imagines herself airborne like the planes taxiing outside are ultimately folded back into the absurdity of her condition, for what is daydreaming but another form of invisible labour, another unpaid shift her mind must work? In this way, Hasina's suffering transcends mere economic exploitation to become a philosophical crisis, she is not just an underpaid worker but Camus' "absurd hero," forced to confront the silence of an indifferent universe each time the vending machine hums to life and demands yet another performance of her meaningless routine.

Hasina's fantasies of flight - whether imagining herself soaring like the airplanes she watches through the terminal windows or daydreaming of simply walking away from her vending machine prison - represent both her sole psychological refuge and the cruelest confirmation of her entrapment. These mental escapes, vivid as they may be in moments of exhausted reverie, ultimately serve to highlight the unbridgeable gap between her imagination and reality, making her physical confinement all the more palpable. When she closes her eyes to picture herself weightless, unmoored from the demands of her body and station, the sudden jolt of a customer's impatient cough or the machine's error alert violently re-anchors her to the very circumstances she seeks to transcend.

The airplanes themselves become taunting symbols - their takeoffs marking not just others' freedom but her own rootedness, their contrails sketching temporary escape routes in the sky that only emphasize how thoroughly earthbound she remains. Even her most elaborate fantasies carry the seeds of their own undoing: in envisioning flight, she must first acknowledge the weight of the chains she cannot break, the family obligations that would tether her even if she somehow found the courage to run. This dialectic of momentary liberation through imagination followed by the crushing return to reality creates a psychological whiplash that leaves her more exhausted than before, her brief flights of fancy ultimately reinforcing the bars of her cage rather than dissolving them. The cruel genius of her oppression lies in how it permits - even requires - these mental escapes as pressure valves to prevent total breakdown, while ensuring they remain just substantial enough to hurt when they dissolve, yet never tangible enough to offer real hope:

The fact that I had no boarding pass made me suffer even when I turned the pages confidently and continued to read; I shuddered at the possibility of an air hostess demanding my boarding pass and, upon my failure to produce it, asking me to get up and follow her into the staff room. I sweated and silently prayed for a kidnapper to appear and start shooting all around. (Salim 194)

Hasina's daily existence constitutes a profound existential crisis that forces her into a relentless confrontation with multiple dimensions of absurdity. Each shift at the coffee vending machine becomes an exercise in confronting the meaningless repetition of her labour, the identical motions of button-pressing, cup-filling, and coin-collecting that stretch into an infinite, soul-crushing loop without purpose or progression. This meaningless work exists within an equally cruel network of relationships: the abusive dynamic with her cousin-boyfriend that masquerades as affection, her mother's

disturbing exhibitionism that violates basic familial trust, and her twin sister's privileged educational path that highlights the arbitrary injustice of their diverging fates. The world around her remains stubbornly indifferent to this suffering, passengers hurry past without seeing her, the airport's gleaming infrastructure celebrates mobility while keeping her trapped, and the economic system treats her as entirely disposable. Her identity becomes reduced to that of a "service worker," a commodified role that systematically erases her individuality, her dreams, even her fundamental humanity, transforming her into just another functional component of the vending machine's operations.

The cruelest irony emerges in her fantasies of flight while she watches planes take off through the terminal windows, imagining herself soaring above her circumstances, these very daydreams serve only to underscore her inescapable grounded-ness, making her physical and economic imprisonment all the more palpable. Yet within this landscape of despair, Hasina cultivates subtle but powerful forms of resistance. Her dark, wry humor, epitomized in observations like "the machine eats coins faster than my brother eats rice" - becomes a vital survival mechanism, allowing her to reclaim agency through irony and linguistic subversion. More materially, her small but deliberate acts of sabotage - the occasional extra change given to sympathetic travelers, the strategic "forgetting" to restock certain items - constitute what political anthropologist James C. Scott identifies as the "weapons of the weak," the everyday forms of resistance available to those denied conventional avenues of protest. These micro-rebellions don't overthrow her oppression, but they create crucial fractures in its totality, preserving her sense of self and dignity in a system designed to annihilate both. In this way, Hasina's existential crisis represents not just passive suffering but an active, if uneven, negotiation between the nausea of meaningless existence and the persistent human impulse toward revolt, however small its manifestations might be.

Hasina's existential anguish transcends individual suffering to voice the silent scream of millions of invisible workers trapped in neoliberalism's machinery. Her story of mechanized labour, familial betrayal, and thwarted dreams, crystallizes the fundamental contradictions of late capitalism, a system that depends on workers like her while rendering them disposable, that celebrates mobility while enforcing stasis, that demands her humanity while systematically erasing it. Through Hasina's eyes, we are forced to confront two devastating questions that pierce the heart of our economic order.

The vending machine's unrelenting demands, the airport's hollow promises of movement, the family's vampiric dependence - all conspire to drain her labour of purpose beyond bare survival. Yet in her dark humor, her stolen moments of reverie, her tiny acts of sabotage, we glimpse the stubborn human insistence on creating meaning even in meaninglessness. Her persistence in the face of absurd oppression recalls Camus' Sisyphus finding purpose in the struggle itself, yet we must ask whether this philosophical consolation merely aestheticizes exploitation.

Salim's genius lies in refusing pat answers - he gives us neither martyr nor revolutionary, but a complex human surviving in the interstices of oppression. By rendering visible what airports and economies work so hard to obscure, the human cost of our cheap coffee, our hurried transactions, our unexamined privilege - the novel issues an unignorable demand. This visibility itself becomes a form of reckoning, forcing readers to confront their own complicity in structures that grind human beings into cogs while pretending they don't exist. The novel's power resides in this paradox: it gives voice to the scream that neoliberalism has tried so hard to silence, while showing how that scream, once heard, implicates us all. Thus, Hasina is positioned as not as a victim, but as a tragic heroine of late capitalism, one whose crisis is both deeply personal and universally political.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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