

## **Covid-19 and metaphor for existence: Notes on Post-lockdown India within 'home'**

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### **Abstract**

The paper attempts to understand the existential defeatism and the recovery of existential meanings that the uncanny Covid-19 pandemonium enacted under the regime of social distancing. The quarantine from the public not only created a dialectics of home and the world but also re-enacted estrangement upon the gendered bodies within the same home metaphor. By engaging with the autobiographies of solitaire of the past and the experiences and expressions of contemporary locked down selves the paper tries to understand the erasures and silences into the discourse on self and solitude and the possibility and impossibility of tactical manoeuvres on the part of the silenced bodies within the quarantine induced domesticity in India.

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**Keywords:** Covid-19, home metaphor, Rousseau, everydayness, gendered bodies.

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### **Introduction**

In the pandemonium unleashed by the outbreak of Covid-19, when physical and social borders are epidemiologically fixated, human existential conditions are witnessing polysemous academic and popular reflections. Today, it appears that our perception of the world is determined by expressed scepticism towards almost everything as the attempts to conquer and conquest the non-human mutant have apparently failed at all levels – medico-scientific, socio-economic and political (local, national, international). The subjection of the modern human by the non-human mutant has shaken the former's claim over transcending the natural more than ever. With the disruption of pre-

Covid-19 routinized time and narrowing down of public space, the *topos* of the now socially isolated 'self' - at 'home' - has emerged as a primary and recurring theme of concern. Desperate attempts have been made to renew existential meanings as an underside to the unbridled meaninglessness and existential defeat in the world outside.

As the "everyday familiarity collapse[d]" and uncanniness or 'un-home-like' took over, the spatially constrained and temporally disoriented self began an anxious search for the "metaphor for existence."<sup>1</sup> Post the global lockdown to 'tame' the virus, home has become the site where the metaphor for existence is materially and discursively situated: either *being* at home or longing for one, as with the case of thousands of migrant workers in India who have walked miles – some to death – in search of this metaphor.

Martin Heidegger contends:

In anxiety one feels '*uncanny*'. Here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which Dasein finds itself alongside in anxiety, comes proximally to expression: the "nothing and nowhere". But here "uncanniness" also means "not-being-at-home" ...Being-in enters into the existential 'mode' of the "not-at-home". Nothing else is meant by our talk about 'uncanniness.'<sup>2</sup>

In uncanniness, the self flees from the "threat to its everyday lostness" - a withdrawal from the 'publicness' and from the absorption in the world - even "though the very world itself is *still* 'there', and 'there' more *obtrusively*."<sup>3</sup> When the conceptuality - of the uncanny situation and human condition as a result of the former - is itself evasive, a metaphor not only provides the epistemological reserve for the constitution of existential concepts, but also points "back towards the connection with the life-world as the constant motivating support..."<sup>4</sup> On an analogous

<sup>1</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, Translated by S. Rendell (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Translated by J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 233.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 233-4.

<sup>4</sup> Blumenberg cited in Steven Rendall, "Translator's introduction" to *Shipwreck with*

note, the discourses generated by the fear of the contagion and the anxiety of an unforeseeable future have led the self to find a temporary comfort within the familiar/home, by transforming it into a re-romanticized hospitable space for belongingness.

In this article we engage with the theme of the 'self at home' in post lockdown India by reflecting upon the gendered experiences and expressions of the selves within the Covid-19 induced spatio-temporal, physical and social quarantine-home. In particular, we have introspected upon the differential selves and/through an exegesis of the autobiographies of the solitaire Jean-Jacques Rousseau and philosopher Catherine Malabou's reflection on the current pandemic induced self. It seems as though the popular romantic discourse of comfort-seeking selves glosses over the alienation of some subjectivities within the same material domesticity and rests upon (re)essentializing womanhood and femininity, making home an experientially inhospitable space. Further, we look at this home through Blumenberg's metaphor of existence as a shipwreck and interrogate the quarantine at home through experiential narrative of (de)gendered bodies - that are scheduled in consonance with varied manifestations and meanings of time. Thus, the metaphor for existence not only enables us to explore the psychic and semantic conceptuality of home under the new 'norms' of social distancing but also the non-conceptuality of it immanent within and through the everydayness of the quarantine.

### **Finding a self within metaphor for existence**

The pandemic and subsequent medico-administrative precautionary reactions to it have inaugurated an overwhelming 'care of the self' through the spatio-temporal possibility for 'knowing oneself'. This has had varied manifestations – from intimacies in the private, withdrawing oneself to the countryside, to “care of the soul-as-substance”<sup>5</sup> and finding

*Spectator*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the self”, in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by L.H. Martin, H. Gutman and P.H. Hutton, (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 25.

solace in alterity – one’s alter ego. In the descriptive accounts that have emerged in this process of locating the dislocated self certain silences have (dis)appeared too. This self is the involuntarily sundered, by the disrupted world reality, now a ‘romanticized self’ in social distancing, projected and (re)created into ‘home’ as an existential metaphor.

Home, as we search for one - reminds us of Hans Blumenberg’s work *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* - is metaphorical for a ship on a voyage drifting away from the firm footing of land. As we are losing the firm footing of land in fear and social/physical distancing, embarking on the ship as a metaphor for home becomes a world-historical moment. However, home of the viral times, as that of the ship on voyage, achieves a terrifying and temporal allegory of seafaring and shipwreck whereby on embarkation, “[w]e [evidently] have burned our bridges behind us - indeed, we have gone further and destroyed the land behind us. Now little ship look out! ...and there is no longer any ‘land.’”<sup>6</sup> While the loss of the firm footing of land leads to unprecedented anxieties, it also has the potential to lead to a new epoch onboard the drifting metaphor of home, even when shipwrecked. On-board this metaphor for existence, the immanent possibilities for meaning making will be explored on the quarantine’s ship travelling through tumultuous waves and exploring the possibilities of a shipwreck.<sup>7</sup>

At home and within domesticity, to secure the metaphor for existence the re-neologisms of ‘family time’ and ‘family bond’ have been placed as a bulwark against the ‘viral times’ and the loss of the public (and sociality/sociability). The re-neologisms are to be managed and strengthened by the figure of the *woman homemaker* in the circumstantial subjection of quarantine (and/or even without the circumstance) who face the societal and *naturalized* burden of keeping the quarantine ship

<sup>6</sup> Blumenberg, *Shipwreck and Spectator*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> The very possibility of getting onboard the metaphor exists only for those privileged for whom home exists both in its materiality and psychologically. The figure of the migrant worker in India who is bereft of the lockdown privilege, dwelling in cramped city spaces and being in spaces of constant movement in their long walk home, is a constant reminder of how exclusive the association with the home metaphor is.

afloat. Hence, we will see how the metaphor for existence is itself caught up in a double dialectics: the self retracts from the inhospitable disrupted reality and (re)configures for itself a safeguard against that inhospitability within the romanticized imaginary of home, at the same time it creates ruptures, silences and erasures within the new hospitable imaginary. Thus, the hospitable manifests not just as a space to redeem the lostness from the public and routinized time but also a space for loneliness and paranoia of being locked up with others - such paranoia is an extension of the divide of homemaker's self from the world and from the other selves within the quarantined domesticity - left without any choice.

The metaphor of existence for the self as a recovery within the 'home' is often incomprehensible and constrained for certain selves. The isolation of the self in solitude or loneliness within the home metaphor is constituted by a semantic field expressed or not through the particularity of family structure. In that sense as Fay Bound Alberti puts it, "[a]ll emotional states and representations are gendered, now as in the past."<sup>8</sup> What emotions one can experience and how they are to be experienced and expressed are thus constitutive of the language of expression that is contingent on gender and other social and physical locations, as is the semantics of 'home'.

How then do we understand the estranged selves or the estrangement from the self under/ within the metaphor for existence? Is it simply a discrete self narration of the experiences of an external world/reality or is it through the process of linguistic expressions of their experiences whose modalities function in tandem with the private and the public - social and political - one is locked up with and without?

### **Experiencing radical Robinson Crusoe at 'home': Rousseau and Malabou in an uncanny 'world'**

As the quarantine became a reality around the globe, a substantive

<sup>8</sup> Fay Bound Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 24.

number of authors began introspecting the connections between the precarious dialectics of hospitable/familiar and inhospitable/uncanny. They have narrated their experiences – with a clear authorial intention placed in the virtual domain – of producing meanings for their own locked up selves, often serving as didactics for others.<sup>9</sup> The quarantined authors' quest for meaning making in isolation or solitude that have emerged from different socio-spatial temporalities brings the experience of their selves close to the works of the hermit 'philosolitude'<sup>10</sup> like Jean-Jacques Rousseau. For this paper, we focus on the reflections of philosopher Catherine Malabou, which was published on the *Critical Inquiry* blog in March 2020.<sup>11</sup>

Right at the beginning of the global confinement Malabou expressed her 'self centered' reflections by 'centering on the self', enumerating how "[t]o Quarantine from Quarantine". She based her process of meaning making on a passage from Rousseau's *Confessions* wherein the philosopher is – involuntarily yet voluntarily – sundered from the world, in a lazaretto:

It was at the time of the plague at Messina, and the English fleet had anchored there, and visited the Felucca, on board of which I was, and this circumstance subjected us, on our arrival, after a long and difficult voyage, to a quarantine of one-and-twenty days.

The passengers had the choice of performing it on board or in the Lazaretto, which we were told was not yet furnished. They all chose the Felucca. The insupportable heat, the closeness of the vessel, the impossibility of walking in it, and the vermin with which it swarmed, made me at all risks prefer the Lazaretto. I was therefore conducted to a large building of two stories, quite empty, in which I found neither window, bed, table, nor chair, not so much as

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed account on this see *Critical Inquiry* "In the Moment" series. <https://critinq.wordpress.com/>

<sup>10</sup> A neologism for intermittent withdrawal for scholastic contemplation, cited in Barbara Taylor, "Philosophical Solitude: David Hume versus Jean-Jacques Rousseau", *The History Workshop Journal* 89, (2020):1-21.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Malabou, "To Quarantine from Quarantine: Rousseau, Robinson Crusoe, and 'I'", *Critical Inquiry*, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020. <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/23/to-quarantine-from-quarantine-rousseau-robinson-crusoe-and-i/>.

even a joint-stool or bundle of straw. My night sack and my two trunks being brought me, I was shut in by great doors with huge locks, and remained at full liberty to walk at my ease from chamber to chamber and story to story, everywhere finding the same solitude and nakedness.<sup>12</sup>

The context of Rousseau's confinement was the plague epidemic of the eighteenth century and as a consequence his felucca was halted in Genoa for a mandatory quarantine of twenty-one days. However, as Rousseau writes, "they gave the passengers the choice of undergoing it on board [the felucca], or in the lazaretto..." He chose the latter. Those familiar with his hermit existence would have easily guessed. Rousseau's quarantine comes with a preferred *choice* to withdraw from the companionship of the other members on-board who decided to confine themselves in the felucca. With this choice, Rousseau created a 'psychic space' inside the *empty* lazaretto to read and write, and reveried through his walks in the burying-ground to gaze at the harbour. For Malabou, Rousseau's choice of the lazaretto signifies a redoubled quarantine—isolating in the Lazaretto from the 'collective isolation' of the crew members in the felucca and within the Lazaretto creating a psychic space of homeliness in communion with oneself and with nature.<sup>13</sup> At the empty lazaretto Rousseau "remained at full liberty to walk...from chamber to chamber and story to story, everywhere finding the same solitude and nakedness." For him thus, severance from the social and of sociability is not loneliness *per se* but a sense of liberty 'to do something' in communion with his own self.

However, the invincibility of Rousseau's solitariness lies not in this redoubled isolation in the plague induced confinement but in the 'everyday individuality' of his estranged 'sensitive soul.' His solitariness - both involuntary and voluntary as expressed in his works - signifies the separation of his paranoid self from the social, as in the "hours of

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, Vol. V, trans. by C. Kelly, (Hanover: University Press of New Zealand, 1995), 248-9. We found it necessary to reproduce the passage as we owe some of the crucial insights of this paper to Malabou's reflections and a response we wrote to it.

<sup>13</sup> Malabou, "To Quarantine from Quarantine".



solitude” of completely withdrawing to his inward self.<sup>14</sup> Withdrawing from the delirium of the external world of companionship and relieving through the solitary walks, Rousseau experiences the “moments of rupture and ecstasy”<sup>15</sup> with his imaginative and romantic sway of the self over the sublime. “The secret world of subjectivity”<sup>16</sup> of the self for Rousseau merges into the “countryside,” as he writes, “install[ing] myself all alone in a boat, which I would row out into the middle of the lake when it was calm;...I let myself float and drift wherever the water took me,...plunged into a host vague yet delightful reveries.”<sup>17</sup>

This idealistic position of the self, revealed through these moments of rupture and ecstasy, is a sardonic imitation of the severed social. It is in the incompatibility of the real world that Rousseau decides to make the self as epicentre, for he wrote, “when I can truly say that I am.”<sup>18</sup> While introspecting about the technology of the self in Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Huck Gutman argues:

The imagination, which exaggerates the isolation and estrangement of the solitary consciousness that has separated itself off from the world, also domesticates a new (imaginary) world, so that unhappy consciousness can regain, through the working of the imaginative power of re-creation, what it has lost, so that it can once again be at home in the world.<sup>19</sup>

In both the instances of involuntary and voluntary withdrawal from the inhospitable world/externality, Rousseau recreates the metaphor for existence through a psychic communion with his self. Malabou too, in her pandemic induced involuntary withdrawal does so, calling it the feeling of being *my-self* at home. Although separated by almost

<sup>14</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. by P. France, (London: Penguin, 2004), 156.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, “Philosophical Solitude”, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Rousseau, *Reveries*, 216.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>19</sup> Huck Guttman, 1988, “Rousseau’s *Confessions*: A Technology of the Self”, in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by L.H. Martin, H. Gutman and P.H. Hutton, (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 110.



three centuries, we can read Malabou's reflections into Rousseau's experience of his 'self' as being/feeling estranged from the world and also constantly discovering ways - psychologically and semantically - to mitigate the loss of the self by visualizing, (re)imaging and finding the traces of familiarity in an alter voice in one's soul or/blended-with the romantic ideals of nature. Thus, Malabou categorically states her choice of the lazaretto as:

Personally, at the moment, I am...trying to be an "individual." This, once again, is not out of any individualism but because I think on the contrary that an *epochè*, a suspension, a bracketing of sociality, is sometimes the only access to alterity, a way to feel close to all the isolated people on Earth. Such is the reason why I am trying to be as solitary as possible in my loneliness. Such is the reason why I would also have chosen the lazaretto.<sup>20</sup>

'Bracketed' from the social, Rousseau's solitariness and Malabou's metaphor for existence in the 'present' quarantine is a search for an "island (*insula*)"<sup>21</sup> drifting away from the perilous externality and at the same time steering away from a shipwreck metaphor into a meaningful existential alterity. But, for both, drifting away with the metaphor for existence had to be supplemented with a second isolation from the 'collective isolation' as Rousseau illustrates with his expression of choosing the *empty* lazaretto. As he writes, "[t]his however, did not induce me to repent at having chosen the Lazaretto rather than the Felucca and, like another new Robinson, I began to organize myself...as I would have done for my whole life."<sup>22</sup> Thus, for Rousseau the metaphor for existence as home is experienced and expressed by withdrawing to one's self, being solitary in loneliness, with or without the social.

Malabou narrates her process of creating a dwelling for her *self* within her own house, thus:

*Sheltered-in-place* has to be a radical Robinson Crusoe experience, an experience that allows one to construct a home out of nothing....this

<sup>20</sup> Malabou, "To Quarantine from Quarantine".

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 249.

radical nakedness of the soul that allows to build a dwelling in one's house, to make the house habitable by locating the psychic space where it is possible to *do* something, that is, in my case, write. I noticed that writing only became possible when I reached such a confinement within confinement, a place in the place where nobody could enter...<sup>23</sup>

To open up the possibility "to do something", through dialogues with the self (and with nature for Rousseau), the "bracketing of sociality, is sometimes the only access to alterity..." For Hannah Arendt, this something to do "...is a solitary but not a lonely business..." Solitude is a human condition in which "I" keeps oneself company and loneliness comes "without being able to split up into the two-in-one."<sup>24</sup> In solitude - both Rousseau and Malabou - have semantically salvaged the "I" from the "shipwreck of existence...through a process of self-discovery and self-appropriation" in search for a *terra firma* within the metaphor for (their) home.<sup>25</sup> Severance of the externality - voluntary or involuntary - psychologically and semantically induces self-consciousness "over against the whirl of atoms" out of which things observed is constituted, including the selves.<sup>26</sup>

Rousseau and Malabou commit to a form of expression as speaking and writing subjects in order to reconcile and justify their existence to create an alternate self "before the gaze of a public" in their lostness.<sup>27</sup> The paradigm of the self in isolating from society is constituted as a subject experienced and expressed through a particular consciousness of the "I", "...so that the self can concurrently create itself in writing and affirm that self it has created"<sup>28</sup> - or as Foucault contends - as a "discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of that statement."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Malabou, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol.I, (San Diego: Harcourt, 1978), 185.

<sup>25</sup> Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*, 14.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 26-27.

<sup>27</sup> Gutman, 105.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 108.

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Vol. I, trans. by R. Hurley,

The voyage on board the drifting ship on the high seas as a metaphor for existence is an existential defeatism often expressed as a metaphor for a shipwreck; while it also signifies a reward for the risks undertaken if one is successful in steering away from a shipwreck or is fortunate enough to get hold of a plank instead of wretchedly drowning oneself to death.<sup>30</sup> The relentless seafaring and shipwreck might also lead into self-discovery, an *insula* like it did for Rousseau and Malabou. The everyday possibility of experiencing Rousseau's "new Robinson" or Malabou's "radical Robinson Crusoe" opens up the immanent psychological and semantic experience and expression of self-discovery in solitude.

In re-reading the works of the solitaire Rousseau into the contemporary experiences of the locked-up selves, the possibility of establishing a solidarity in feeling the rather too 'homely' paradox opens up, while also providing a conceptual asylum. However, what happens to the possibility of doing 'something' within the metaphor of home when the radical psychic space is itself non-existent or at worst deplorable? Or that 'something' is always already subjected not just to 'the circumstance' - as in the case of the eighteenth century Plague and the outbreak of Covid-19 - but to the subjection of the social (in the world as well as within the reconfigured domesticity) that both Rousseau and Malabou may have successfully bracketed their selves from? What does one do if they are unable to carve out a "place where nobody could enter" alone? Where does one go if they want to leave the Felucca/home/ship but there *seems* to be no possibility of choosing the Lazaretto/solitude/plank?<sup>31</sup>

(New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 61.

<sup>30</sup> Blumenberg, 18.

<sup>31</sup> We see Rousseau's real-life experience of leaving the felucca in tandem with Blumenberg's metaphorical ship of existence. In the current pandemic induced scenario, we have placed the quarantined space of home in the same real and metaphorical category. Similarly, the Lazaretto becomes a metaphor for solitude which in Blumenberg's semantic would signify the island one reaches moving away from shipwreck afloat on a plank. Thus, the Felucca symbolizes the physical space of home and the Lazaretto is symbolic of the psychic space of solitude.

## **(De)gendered bodies at 'home': Notes from Post-lockdown India**

The first lockdown imposed from midnight of 24 March 2020 in India brought initial respite to the urban upper/middle class *savarna*<sup>32</sup> self as it calmed their apprehensions about becoming pathological - contracting the virus through public sociality and the fear of becoming contagious within domesticity. This respite is evidence not just of the structural privilege that comes along with one's socio-economic status, but also the privilege of certainty regarding matters of life and death - of not being jobless, unsafe, hungry and helpless - of which having a home, both literally and metaphorically, to embark upon is central.<sup>33</sup>

At a time when most feel estranged from the world outside in one sense or another, the home of the urban upper/middle class *savarna* has been transformed into multiple spaces enmeshed together - office work *from* home, school *from* home. Within this particular domesticity, an expansive phallogocentric self away from the severed world is reinventing an "'other' who is nothing more than a vehicle through which its production and self-recognition are mediated."<sup>34</sup> The militarized semantics of regulation, segregation and physical distancing of the viral times has supplemented "a whole literary fiction of *festivity*"<sup>35</sup> through the re-neologism of family time and family bond.

<sup>32</sup> *Savarna* is the term used to denote those persons who are born in one of the three privileged castes - *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya* - in the hierarchical and discriminatory system of caste in the Hindu social order. As an idea it denotes Brahminical patriarchy.

<sup>33</sup> The sudden imposition of a complete nation-wide lockdown had a differential impact on various socio-economic groups and regions in India. For instance, the already marginalised urban poor's (daily wage earners; who may or may not be migrant workers) conditions got worsened due to the abrupt shutdown of workplaces, lack of transportation and ban on inter-state movement, and with little or no monetary savings and preserved/stored food to bank upon. Their condition can be starkly contrasted with the perceptive respite the lockdown brought to the urban upper/middle class *savarna* self.

<sup>34</sup> Claire Colebrook, "The politics and Potential of Everyday Life", *New Literary History* 33, 4(2002): 687-706.

<sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by A. Sheridan, (New York: Vintage,1978), 197-98.

The festivity re-neologisms, to be managed and strengthened by the figure of the *woman homemaker*, are scheduled primarily around the gendered (non)availability of 'spare time' and 'time to spare'. Spare time either signifies the time in the modern temporal matrix outside of paid and prioritized (productive) work, or the time that one does not have something *to do*, or both. However, this temporal matrix is based on the devaluation of work itself - often equating unpaid work in the house with spare time or not *doing* something. Since cooking, cleaning and caring are not considered as work, the time spent on doing those is considered as spare time. What is ironic post-lockdown is that while working *from* home, men employed in jobs which are internet and phone call driven have a lot of spare time, they do not have any time to spare *for* work *for* home. "There is nothing to *do*", "...it is so boring" are statements uttered every now and then.

Having *nothing* to do, the bored quarantined public *self* of men has sought *natural* compensation of his trivialized existence by imposing the responsibility of its alleviation upon women through the efficient utilization of their time - assumed to be spare or non-temporal. Further, with consumerism curtailed by the closure of the public, it has been reshaped in its primitive form by claiming 'extraordinary something' from the kitchen and continuous 'sociality' (read care) with the young, old and *equal* to keep them entertained in their spare time. The new quarantine melancholy also opened up a space to 'get back to *normal* sexual (not necessarily consensual) life' which led to an increase in demand (virtual and real) for physical and emotional intimacy. Sexuality, mediated by the quarantined space of patriarchy, supplemented the one-sided imposition of these spatio-temporal demands. Afterall, as Federici satirically brought out in the "Wages Against Housework" pamphlet, "nothing will be so powerful in destroying the healing virtues of a smile."<sup>36</sup>

Being-at-home, thus, is not a mere abstraction that signifies a retreat from lostness in an obtrusive world, but a re-enactment of gendered bodies in their everydayness—in the direct and immediate relations—

<sup>36</sup> Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework*, (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975), 1.

overshadowed by the dialectics of homeliness and unhomeliness. The gendered metaphoric of quarantine *every-day* resonates with Colebrook's distinction between matter and form. She writes, "[m]an has always been the subjective, forming, active, expansive, and appropriating power of praxis, while the feminine has variously been defined either as the unthinking matter through which form realises itself, or as the effect of forming activity that has become mere semblance and simulation."<sup>37</sup> Thus, in everydayness the feminine becomes a matter of supplement and difference whose *every-day* is abstracted and enslaved within the gendered metaphoric.

A peep into the quarantine's ship tells us that it is certainly wrecked for the crew/family members on whom the unequal burden to sail through tumultuous waves rests. Yet, those for whom the ship is wrecked are not able to call it one because of the always already existing gendered consciousness that is mundanely performed which secures and is secured by the seemingly inviolable institution of family. It is also made to rest on the ship's captain with the metaphor of 'he' who navigates 'smoothly' through a potential shipwreck by deploying the re-neologisms of family time and family bond. Due specifically to these re-neologisms and metaphors, the crew member's/home maker's estrangement is also made out to be naturally endearing. Furthermore, the estranged self is also accountable for the rejuvenation of the lost self of the captain - lost with no sight of land (the pre-Covid-19 normal) and with the possibility of a shipwreck (the failure of the re-neologisms and the fiction of festivity).

We now reflect upon the every-day in quarantine by focussing on a particular female self Subarna's experience from post-lockdown India. Through her narrative we interrogate Rousseau and Malabou's elucidation of how to confine one's self in solitude within confinement.

Every night since the lockdown began, Subarna Ghosh would go up to her apartment's terrace at about 10.30 pm, which was when she usually wound up all the domestic and professional chores for the day, so she could relax.

<sup>37</sup> Colebrook, 688.

Soon enough, she noticed a similar pattern among other women in the neighbourhood, who also came up to the terrace – around the same time – to relax after a full day’s work.<sup>38</sup>

Locked up with family, for the women of the house the new norm of distancing from the social is a mockery of their lived reality wherein the social is closer and stronger than ever. The social here is an immediate reference to the institution of family which finds its structure in the heteropatriarchal gender order. To say that there has been an increase in the intensity of the social - gender order, gender norms/roles - for the woman due to the subjected circumstance of quarantine does not by any means indicate that prior to the occurrence of the circumstance, women were not constrained by it. However, what it does indicate is that in the viral nature of times that induced the norm to ‘stay at home’, the possibility of temporarily escaping from the patriarchal constraints and scrutiny for a breather has been minimized, to the extent of not being there at all. The escape/breather is a reference to the pre-Covid-19 socio-spatio-temporality – professionally, at work outside home; domestically, at home without the men and children who have gone out to earn and learn; socially, outside and inside home with people of their choice and liking (on the phone or face to face). “A place in a place where nobody could enter” or only those who one would permit was a possibility prior to the imposition of the lockdown.

For Subarna, the Felucca that Rousseau chose not to stay in is symbolic of the home of the viral times. Although Rousseau describes his preference for the Lazaretto in terms of physical discomforts of living in the Felucca, his works make one realize that that was his *normal* hermit existence. His preferred *choice* to withdraw from the companionship of others onboard the Felucca led him to physically isolate himself in the Lazaretto wherein he further withdrew into his self in alterity. Subarna, tied not just to the subjected circumstance of the Covid-19 induced lockdown but also to heteropatriarchal gender order secures for herself

<sup>38</sup> D Shreya Veronica, “The chore wars: Men, women and housework”, *Deccan Chronicle*, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2020. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/lifestyle/culture-and-society/170620/the-chore-wars-men-women-and-housework.html>.



a few minutes in the Lazaretto/terrace after undertaking paid and unpaid work the entire day. It is the pertinent to note here is that it is the redundant unpaid (non)work that keeps the Felucca/home afloat wherein the patriarchal vermin breeds.

Her temporary escapes to the Lazaretto every night is a result of the 'insupportable closeness' of the social and the subsequent *impossibility* to 'relax' in the Felucca. However, we must remember that for Subarna, the question of choice—to go to the Lazaretto as and when desired—does not exist. It is only after all work/non-work is accomplished that Subarna *earns* the few moments of being alone (but not lonely) in the Lazaretto.

The problematic of transmuting subjection of the viral circumstance into "productive solitude"<sup>39</sup> — sailing to an island away from the wrecked ship — often than not sits comfortably within the double dialectics; as creating the imaginary of home produces erasures and incomprehensibility, so does the metaphor for existence lead to 'lostness' and loneliness. In case of the erasures, the gendered metaphoric of the perilous voyage becomes indefinite — locked up with others onboard — with little hope for finding an *insula*, as the choice for an isolated withdrawal is deprecated as a transgression, and hence deplorable. In fact, the radical psychic space of withdrawal to one's self would be held up in derision, leading to the production of stigmatized and morbid bodies in the very space delineated for 'staying safe', i.e. the metaphor for existence.

The *every-day* in quarantine within the metaphor for existence cannot be defined unless we 'unfamiliarize' the ways in which the traditional symbolism of femininity have been revived under the regime of social distancing, wherein the social in social distancing seems more powerful than ever. The domesticity of the lockdown has, in its revelation of the unstable nature or the terrifying allegory of the metaphor, provided crucial insights into the (re)essentialized *feminine condition*. The inscription of traditional femininity connected to the notions of being

<sup>39</sup> Taylor, 14.

chaste, passive and idle in doing non-work/household chores, has now been reconfigured by the anxious masculine, emasculated by the fear of worklessness in the public and no work to do in the private.<sup>40</sup> This masculine anxiety of emasculation that metamorphosed into a re-romanticized self, with reinvigorated perception of intimate time at home, has ironically brought back the symbolisms resonated by Esther S Neumeyer's question, "[w]hat do women do with their leisure?" And entrapped in that symbolism suggested, "[s]ome, not knowing what to do with it, find surplus time a bore."<sup>41</sup> Or, as expressed by William Huggins, "addicted to do nothing, and to help each other in doing nothing."<sup>42</sup>

The festivity of family time – as a fictional celebration of life – is always haunted by a specter of *redundancy* and *non-work*. This understanding of everydayness at home flows from the familiarity assigned to the practices as being boring, meaningless and as not-doing-something. Thus, not only are women presumed to have time to do housework, but are believed to have done that *for time* itself. Housework was, "transformed into a natural attribute of female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character."<sup>43</sup> The art of doing something including the "'fine art of cooking', in which everyday skills turns nourishment into a language of the body and the body's memories" too have been swept "under hems of femininity."<sup>44</sup> Taking the definition of spare time further, the passivity assigned to these everyday practices – which require the expending of physical and mental labour – which is co-constitutive of the very discourse of spare time, signifies not just the

<sup>40</sup> S. Currell, *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 32.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Currell, 107.

<sup>42</sup> William Huggins, *Sketches in India, treating on Subjects connected with the Government; Civil and Military Establishments; Characters of the European; and Customs of the Native Inhabitants*, (London: John Letts, 1824), 92.

<sup>43</sup> Federici, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by S. Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), ix.

time that one does not have 'something to do' but also something that one does for time itself.

Henri Lefebvre in *Critique of Everyday Life* writes that "familiarity is not necessarily the known. Familiarity, what is familiar, conceals human beings and makes them difficult to know by giving them a mask we can recognize, a mask that is merely the lack of something."<sup>45</sup> That by no means is as an illusion but constitutes part of the *reality* that one is made to cling onto by wearing the recognizable masks. Familiarity is drawn from these masks we assign to their skin, flesh and blood entrapped into their social and cultural dwellings.<sup>46</sup> Looking behind these familiar masks we find only absences, erasures and silences within the home metaphor make it inherently instable – semantically and psychologically. By unfamiliarizing, the inhospitable/uncanny and hospitable/familiar dichotomy collapses for the gendered bodies within the same space whereby the self has involuntarily withdrawn away from the world.

Thus, within the everyday celebration of the fiction of belongingness, the quarantine has cooped in a renewed sociality in which the *woman homemaker's* estrangement has been made to appear endearing, insular and as a language of the body. Any usage of signs alien to the phallogocentric norms/symbols or attempts at appropriation of a psychic space by the self for *itself* would be a deplorable signifier for a form of resistance. All attempts and invoking of alien signs, if considered to be prospects for dealienation, appears at the cost of emotional threat propelled towards loneliness. An *escapism* from the metaphor for existence – the inhospitable home/Felucca/ship – is constrained and immunized from the viral times. Escapism provides the possibility for an expression of the experiences of the contradictions, which has been severed with the severance from the uncanny world. Going back to Lefebvre's caution, "[c]ontradictions which we tend to confuse with alienations, are creative. Contradictions gives rise to problems, and thus to a set of possibilities and the need to find a solution, and therefore to

<sup>45</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday life: Introduction*, Vol. I, trans. by J. Moore, (London: Verso, 1991), 15.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

the need to make a *choice*. The solution may be optimal, mediocre, bad or phoney (i.e., illusionary).<sup>47</sup> However, escapism need not always be an allegory for dealienation but could also be tactical in nature – having its origin in everyday practices – since the place of tactics and the tactical still belongs to the “other”, as Michel de Certeau wrote:

A tactic insinuates itself into other’ place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal [may have] no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances...Many everyday practices are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many “ways of operating”: victories of the “weak” over the “strong”, clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, “hunter’s cunning”, manoeuvres, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike.<sup>48</sup>

At this unprecedented viral world-historical moment different attempts at escapism, dealienation, contradictions, and tactical ruses on the part of differential selves requires introspections often with the limitations of non-conceptuality. With the limitations on the human capacity to comprehend the situation, the possibility of newer reflections on the existential situations within and without the metaphor of home – not necessarily in disjuncture with the past – has opened up. By juxtaposing the expressions and experiences of the post-lockdown selves we attempted an extrapolation of these within the metaphor for home in its plurality. The everyday within home opens up this possibility for introspecting the older forms of estrangement from the present moment of anxiety and fear. The selves under discussion in the paper resonate these fear and anxiety. The multiple ways the supposed existential defeatism is mitigated by the personalized selves at different historical junctures enables us to come in terms with the future pedagogy for the self at a time when conceptuality of the viral situation is not yet closer to an optimistic imagination. The nature of

<sup>47</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, Vol. II, trans. by J. Moore, (London: Verso, 2002), 209.

<sup>48</sup> Certeau, xix.

the uncertain conditions we find ourselves in today itself is an obstacle to conclude our reflections from post-lockdown India on the (de)gendering of selves within home – metaphorically and literally. Yet, we attempt to conclude with a pertinent question connected with the home metaphor: is the politics and potentials of the tactical manoeuvres and ruses itself reconfigured within the quarantined domesticity? Covid-19 in its uncanniness provides an introspection of the genealogy of such ruses, and unfamiliarizing of recognizable masks within the same old home metaphor, re-romanticized in the guise of current existence.