

## Existentialism in Arun Joshi's Novels

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### Abstract

Existentialism is a twentieth century's most influential literary and philosophical movement that focuses on individual existence. It originated in the philosophical and literary works of Sartre and Camus. It focuses on acting on one's conviction in order to arrive at personal truth. Existentialism deals with the problems of the meaning and purpose of life on earth, finding the world as hostile in nature. It is an attitude, an outlook that emphasizes on the purpose and meaning of human existence in this world. Indian form of existentialism as manifested in *The Gita* and *The Upanishads* deals with the problems of our existence on earth. The basic theory of existentialism is an insistence on the actual existence of the individual as the basic and important fact, instead of a reliance on the theories of abstractions. The central doctrine is that man is what he makes of himself; he is not predestined by a God or by society, or by biology.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Alienation, Existence, Technology, loneliness, Rootlessness, Labyrinth, Foreignness.

The present paper examines the theme of existentialism in the novels of Arun Joshi. Arun Joshi adds a new dimension to the genre of Indian Fiction in English by introducing the theme of existentialism in his novels. His fictional world is characterized by the alienation of the individual. Arun Joshi's novels, from *The Foreigner* to *The City and the River* are full of darkness, the darkness of the identity, conflict and personal sufferings. Ultimately there is rejuvenation and elevation from the shadow of the darkness by the arrival of the light in the form of knowledge. Arun Joshi (1939-1993) an author of rarer sensibility and style, attempts a serious probe into the existential problem and spiritual disturbances of mankind by fixing his focus on certain individualistic characters. His novels demonstrate the edifying lessons of our spiritual heritage that have not been totally irrelevant with the growth of materialism and the rapid westernization of life in our country. Arun Joshi, a twentieth novelist strongly believes that "Hinduism is a highly existential philosophy that lays too much emphasis on the right way of living."<sup>1</sup> The Upanishad teaching is central theme of all of his novels.

Arun Joshi's works are not a product of the imaginative work for the creative writing world. Rather it is something which is close to him in reality and that is true because he has accepted that much of his writing is his autobiographical sketches from his stay in America as a student to the world of unseen mystery in India. The theme and the motive that Arun Joshi gives to the novel are not based on scientific observation merely but on discovering the reality which lies hidden in the actuality of his own life. To understand the novels of Arun Joshi, one needs to keep in mind that what he is writing is not the casual effect that he is trying to establish. Rather it is his experimentation with the moments of the acute suffering situations of human life to study the human predicament.

Arun Joshi noticed the collapse of old values resulting in an absurd universe. He saw contemporary man in search of a way to lead a meaningful life. He has recorded modern man's traumas and agonies in his novels. This concept echoes in all his novels. His fictional world is a revelation of a world where man is confronted by the self and the questions of his existence. He skilfully pen down the man's inner problems like rootlessness, restlessness, existential dilemma, crisis of identity in the present world. Arun Joshi's novels are the revelation of human predicament in an indifferent and inscrutable universe. Along with the problem of meaninglessness the present society is full of exploitations. There is only chaos, confusion and anarchy in social life. Men do not realize their duty and responsibility towards others. Arun Joshi was pained to see the chaotic conditions of the society. He therefore took into his hand the task of providing a solution to the society to escape from the vicious circle of rapid industrialization. Thus through the struggles of his protagonists he aims to achieve a good society and happy and joyful individuals. Distrust, treachery, exploitation, etc., dominate the present world.

To understand and analyse the novels of Arun Joshi, it is worthwhile to have a subjective understanding of the novels rather than that of the objective reality that shaped the protagonist. In the succeeding pages the novels of Arun Joshi in their chronological sequence have been analysed with special reference to the existential and alienation.

The most significant and straightforward treatment of the theme of alienation can be found in the novels of Arun Joshi. His maiden novel, *The Foreigner* (1968) is a very compelling existential work in which the theme of

alienation is treated with great concentration. *The Foreigner* illustrates the influence of technology on modern man. The modernization and industrialization is heading our civilization to a disaster. Human virtues like affinity, love, sympathy, kindness etc. have disappeared altogether. Modern man in contemporary society finds himself lonely, frustrated, dejected, isolated and almost alienated due to his detachment and non-involvement with his fellow-beings. The most penetrating problem man faces today is the problem of meaninglessness. Man today suffers not from war, famine, persecution, famine and ruin but from one's own inner problem. Each of us has got some or other inner problem. Arun Joshi being himself connected with the industries and technology takes up this treatment beautifully and emphatically

The novel is the main story of Sindi Oberoi a student of Mechanical Engineering— a rootless young man, who tells his own story. The narrative includes Babu, an Indian student in America, June, a simple and passionate American girl, Mr. Khemka, a Delhi industrialist. Sindi describes with honesty and sincerity his search for the meaning. Although an Indian by birth, Sindi feels himself to be an outsider, a foreigner, an alien not only because he is obsessed with the impermanence and transience of things. It is apparent that Sindi's alienation lies within him.

Joshi exhibits the agony of loneliness in uncovering the psychological conflict in the character of Sindi Oberoi in his quest for meaning through a series of relationships. Sindi feels himself a foreigner, an outsider, a stranger, not just because he is a Kenya-born Indian living in the United States and later in India without home or family but because he is obsessed by the impermanence of things. He is a lover, a spectator who wants to stand out of the maze of action dreading involvement. He is an existentialist character— "rootless, restless and luckless in a mad, bad and absurd world."<sup>2</sup> His rootlessness is rooted in his soul which precipitates one crisis after another. He too acknowledges "I have no roots" (p.143) His loneliness is exaggerated by his withdrawal from society.

Living in Kenya, London and Boston, he undergoes various changes through personal experiences. While in Kenya, he contemplates suicide, and when he comes to London, the same despair remains with him. A girl, Anna, seeks to rediscover her lost youth, and lives for him, but in response he gives her nothing and shows his liking for Kathy. Eventually Kathy abandons him. Sindi's life in various places at various levels taught him something or the other. While studying in London he got a job of dishwashing at a night club in Soho. There are two lasting impressions of his life. His escapade with Anna, a minor artist separated from her husband who was not yearning for him or anybody and Kathy, who left him after carrying on with him, for a few weeks and went back to her husband because she thought "marriage was sacred and had to be maintained at all cost", (168) these relations taught him to practice detachment and non-involvement in human emotions. The broken relationship disturbs him, and in America he is "afraid of getting involved" (53) with June, an American girl, in spite of his determination not to get involved. Sindi believes that possession generates pain as it implies involvement. Sindi as a student of Engineering at Boston meets June at a foreign student's gathering. She likes him but he fights hard with himself to escape another affair. Sindi's sense of detachment and rootlessness is evident June asks him where he was from. Sindi's reaction to the question provides a clue to his alienation: "Everybody always asked me the same silly question. 'Where are you from?' as it really mattered a great deal where I was from." (p. 23) Sindi has misconstrued the term detachment for himself. It's just a way of avoiding commitment which drives Babu and June towards death. Sindi confesses "All along I had acted out of lust and greed and selfishness and they had applauded my wisdom. When I had only sought a detachment I had only driven a man to his death." (p. 6) He realizes his mistake of rejecting June's love, could have proved last emotional anchor for him. His unconcern born of sense of detachment proves fatal and he fails to meet June before her death. The tragedy upset Sindi. He feels miserable because he holds himself indirectly responsible for the death of his beloved June and his friend Babu. He is upset at the death of Babu. His sense of alienation becomes finely tuned. He wants to move away from America in search of mental peace. Being isolated he had seen the consequences of practising detachment in America. Sindi decides to leave the country and go to India. This he decides with a flip of coin which goes in favour of his ancestor's land. "Like many of my breeds I believed erroneously that I could escape from a part of myself by hopping from one land mass to another" (176) for in another development, on reaching New Delhi while making a casual courtesy call he accepts a job in the firm of Babu Rao Khemka's father. He gets a last chance of redemption when he comes to India and takes over Mr. Khemka's business. However first he is unwilling to join the business but all his hesitation dissolves when he visits Muthu who tells to him "But it is involvement, sir. Sometimes detachment is in actually getting involved." (239) He ultimately believes that right meaning of detachment. Finally Sindi accepts Muthu's suggestion to take charge of the factory. This sheds light on the "message" of disinterested involvement. 'a line of reasoning that led to the inevitable conclusion that for me, detachment consisted in getting involved with the world.' (226)

The above account shows that Sindi is an existential everyman of our time. It is about things that Sindi wants - the courage to be and the capacity to love. His alienation is of the soul and not of geography. At one place he confesses that his 'foreignness' lies 'within' himself and it drives him from crisis to crisis making it difficult for

him to leave 'himself' behind wherever he goes. (61) Right from the starting he is eager to find "the meaning of life". He himself wants "to do something meaningful." (41)

Sindi feels an alien everywhere and does not belong to any place, and his words and behaviour create the same impression in all those with whom he meets. In the very beginning of their encounter June tells Sindi that he would be a foreigner anywhere: "There is something strange about you, you know. Something distant. I'd guess that people are with you they feel like they're with a human-being. May be it's an Indian characteristic, but I have a feeling you'd be a foreigner anywhere". (35) Sheila Babu's sister tells him when he comes to India afterwards: "you are still a foreigner, you don't belong here". (149) (122) He muses over his foreignness: Somebody had begotten me without a purpose and so far I had lived without a purpose, unless you could call the search for peace a purpose. Perhaps I felt like that because I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if I had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter! It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner. My foreignness lay within me and I couldn't leave myself behind wherever I went. (55)

His alienation makes him a total cynical and frustrated. June mother tells him "you are just cynical my boy." Sindi's parentage and early life made him a nowhere man. He cultivates a sense of detachment to overcome his painful past, which includes "Being a product of hybrid culture". He is aware of his rootlessness. He wants to love June but is afraid of involvement and marriage. Hence he remarked: "I was afraid of possessing anybody and I was afraid of being possessed, and marriage meant both". (91) He develops a theory of attachment which makes him deny the love of June which echoes in his these lines when June asks him her he says "Marriage wouldn't help June. We are alone both you and I. That is the problem. And our loneliness must be resolved from within." (p.133)

Arun Joshi's second novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* was published in 1971, is considered as an existentialist in certain aspect, three years after *The Foreigner*. But the theme of the novel is again the same. It develops the theme of anxiety and alienation more effectively than *The Foreigner*.

In the novel we are introduced with the protagonist Bimal Biswas; popularly known as Billy Biswas, a Banjara Indian by caste, who suffers from a sense of alienation about the world around him and at last to get relaxation move into a primitive world. Billy had his education in Britain and America. At the time when he is in America, The protagonist is alienated from the modern civilization; he seeks and finds his fulfilment in his communion with the tribal. Here we can see a painful journey of Billy from alienation to affirmation and community.

In this novel Arun Joshi display the behaviour of Billy Biswas with the cool, collected ways of Romi Sahai, the collector friend of Billy, who is also the narrator of the story. The novel commences with a very strong account of the human and natural association of these two Indian students in America. At the beginning Romi tells us that Billy belongs to the upper crust of Indian Society. But he also admits that he has not been able to comprehend Billy properly and fully. As in the case of *The Foreigner*, this is an equally powerful story of the narrator's awakening awareness: "As I grow old, I realize that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to understand. The attempt to understand is probably even more futile". (7) Arun Joshi has created Billy Biswas as a hero who longs intensively to locate his real self not in the environment of westernized culture but in the most innocent, most native even anthropological past of Indian culture.

It is often described as existentialist in certain aspects. It is concerned with the crisis of self, the problems of identity and the quest for fulfilment. It develops the theme of anxiety and alienation more effectively than the treatment meted out in his first novel, *The Foreigner*. Billy's quest is deeper than Sindi's. He is born and brought up in a fairly comfortable background. He comes "from the upper-upper crust of Indian society." (9) His family has "all claims of aristocracy". (12) Yet Billy, it appears has little interest in the phoney, hot-shot and sordid modern civilization although he lives with his family, he is all alone, isolated and alienated, a stranger in the real sense of the term. His awareness of the deeper layers of his personality makes him an existentialist, estranged and alienated from the superficial reality of life. He is the predicament of an alienated personality who never feels at home in the modern bourgeois society.

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* makes a complex and interesting piece of narrative structuring which is based on principles of parallelism and contrast. In short, the narrative methods control very effectively the action, the meaning and the character of the novel. Joshi's elemental concern in the novel is alienation and community. The author gives evidence of a rare versatile in his second novel adding a new dimension to the theme of alienation in Indian – English fiction.

The theme of alienation and rootlessness once again makes its mark in Joshi's third novel. Shyam Asnani says that Arun Joshi's skill lies "in his ability to describe experience in a human voice so that the texture of the experience comes through, and his ability to convey the philosophical, moral complexities of human life without losing the life itself."<sup>3</sup> Shyam Asnani, "A Study of Arun Joshi's Fiction", *The Literary Half-Yearly*, (July-1978), p.112.

Ratan Rathor of *The Apprentice*, realizes that there is no escape from society of the self. It is the story of a young man, who out of sheer exhaustion of joblessness and privation is aim to shed the honesty and the old-world morality of his father to become an “apprentice” to the corrupt civilization. One is alienated and rootless in this “phony” world unless one accepts and adjusts to “the guilt” of the modern society in order to belong. Ratan, after his initial hesitation yields completely to the corruption of modern society and thrives on it.

Ratan’s sense of individuality comes into conflict with his life of hypocrisy. Ratan finally realizes that one cannot live for oneself because no human act is performed in isolation and without consequence. Therefore, each act should be performed with a sense of responsibility. Hence, out of acute sense of alienation and a quest to understand the meaning of life. Ratan undergoes the sternest apprenticeship in the world. Symbolically he states at the lowest dusting the shoes of the congregation outside the temple every morning on his way to the office. Thus he would like to expiate his sins of cowardice, dishonesty and even indirect murder. He learns the lesson of humility. Ratan also feels that he has lost all significant in life and takes himself to be “a nobody”: “I was a nobody. A NOBODY - - Deep down I was convinced That I had lost my significance: As an official: as a citizen: as man”. (73) In depicting the painful existentialist predicament of Ratan, Joshi makes him a peculiarly modern man “at once every man and nobody.”<sup>4</sup>

Arun Joshi’s fourth novel, *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) is a continuation of the existential quest dealt with in his earlier novels. It explores dilemma of existence with greater intensity and against a wider backdrop of experience. Arun Joshi here also continues his engagement with the theme of alienation and dispossession. But we find a different dimension and direction in the treatment of the theme of alienation and dispossession in *The Last Labyrinth*. It portrays the spiritual alienation and dispossession of Som Bhaskar against the backdrop of a haunting world of life, love, God and death.

The novel is a story of its protagonist Som Bhaskar, a millionaire industrialist, who represents the contemporary phase of the dilemma of modern man groping through the labyrinth of life, existence and reality. It exhibits the confluence of the existentialist anxiety as exemplified in *The Stranger*, the ‘Karmik’ principles of ‘detachment’ and ‘action’ on the pattern of ‘*The Bhagvad Gita*’ as shown in *The Apprentice*, and the ceaseless longing for the essence of life being “obsessed with a latent quest for’ a great force, uncraft” as observed in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. Thus, the concourse of the ‘triveni’ in the form of the mystical urge of Som Bhaskar is presented in his incessant longing for the vitals of life and existence.

*The Last Labyrinth* is like other novels of Arun Joshi. It requires an understanding of the revelation of a world where human race is confronted by the self and the question of his existence is directly correlated with the identity issues. An illustrious novel, *The Last Labyrinth* ideally depicts the craziness, pain, agony and selfishness of love. The title of the story is self-explanatory in the sense that at the end of the story one of the characters, Anuradha, disappeared in the last labyrinth to hide herself from the central character, Som. *The Last Labyrinth* is classical in its sense and meaning but modern in perception, whereas medieval in its background and plots. The understanding of the novel requires the reader to understand it through multi-dimensional approach, since with the meaning and quest for identity of life, at any particular juncture of life, can be better perceived through it.

Arun Joshi’s fifth and last novel, *The City and The River*, was first published in 1990 by Vision Books Limited, New Delhi. It strikes an entirely different theme from Arun Joshi’s earlier novels. It is a review on the political scenario of the times. The events portrayed in the novel are reminiscent of the days of the Emergency of 1974-75 in India.

The novel exists as a powerful commentary on the political scenario of the past, the present and the future; it rightly claims a privileged place among the political novels of our literature. It is an existentialist commentary on the absurdity of human situation. Like his earlier novels, herein, too, he continues to explore the existential and hostile world. The story is imbued with an eternal significance. The scene of action is a Nowhere City. The two important characters in it, the teacher, the ageless Yogeshwara, and the disciple, the Nameless-one, symbolize the processes of regeneration and decay. Here we find the Grand Master’s urge to dominate and the boatmen stand the desire to assert one’s identity. The atmosphere of the city is absolutely unnatural and chaotic.

*The City and the River* forms a link in Arun Joshi’s existential concerns. Among the existential tenets such as absurdity, anarchy, meaninglessness, emptiness, alienation and despair, “the most important element which stresses the sanctity of the subjective individuality is the authenticity of the self.”<sup>5</sup>

In *The City and The River* Joshi turns his focus from the private to the public. Instead of focusing with the existential predicament of an individual, here he deals with the socio-political and existentialist crisis of the entire “City” and thus of the whole humanity itself. In this novel, too, he takes up his favourite existentialist issues of faith, commitment, choice, responsibility and identity but the way he handles them is somewhat different from that of his earlier novels. Here he looks into these issues with the spectacles of politics, equipment he has not been used to, raising the novel to the level of politico-allegorical satire.

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Thus the prominent characters in the novel, suffer from existential predicament for different reasons. "They suffer from alienation, weariness, boredom, rootlessness, meaninglessness in their lives"<sup>6</sup> In this relentless search "they withdraw from human ambience to natural environs of peace and tranquillity but here too they find no response and equanimity. They are nowhere men in quest of a somewhere place"<sup>7</sup> They are tormented by their hollow existence. Joshi is obsessively occupied with the individual's quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that provide spiritual nourishment to the estranged self in a seemingly chaotic and meaningless world. Existential conflict in Joshi springs from the self's craving for the fulfilment of certain psycho-emotional needs, from the desire to overcome the horror of separateness, of powerlessness and of listlessness.

Arun Joshi's novels express the anguish of sensitive individuals continually tortured by their spiritual uprootedness, clash & confusion of values generated by the sheerly materialistic, self-centred & corrupt society. Almost all his novels deal with the issues of existential anguish, alienation and dispossession. He is mainly concerned with the dimensions of individual & social existence.

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