

# Elements Of Existentialism in The Works of Arun Joshi

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## Abstract:

Arun Joshi is an existential novelist that occupies a distinct and distinctive place in the world of post-Independence Indian English writings. Unlike his contemporary Indian English writers, he neither writes for entertainment nor for any political or social issues. He experiments with the issue of human predicament through his protagonists, particularly the motives responsible for their freedom of choice and the effect of these choices on their psyche. In his fictional world, he probes deep into the psyche of his protagonists and highlights their interactions with the Sartrean view of life. Through his protagonists, he portrays the inner recesses and existential trauma of modern men and deals with their efforts to search a meaning of life in this materialistic world. The problem of alienation and isolation from self and society is a major issue in his fictional world which parallels him with the Western existential novelists. His first novel *The Foreigner* is excellently parallel with Camus' *The Outsider*. He received the most prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his fourth existential novel *The Last Labyrinth* in 1982. The fictional world of Arun Joshi mainly consists of five novels as: *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), and *The City and the River* (1990). His fictional world surprisingly represents the Western existential philosophy in general and Sartrean existentialism in particular.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Alienation, Isolation, Philosophy, Determinism

## Introduction:

Literature has been a mirror of human cultures and traditions since the dawn of civilization. It has been the most powerful platform to reveal human emotions and thoughts. For T. S. Eliot, the purpose of literature is to turn blood into ink. Comedies make us laugh, tragedies drown us into tears, and thought-provoking literature introduces us with the world of mystery and treasure of human achievements. So literature provides us an opportunity to be acquainted with the persons who are beyond our times. It introduces us with their life time achievements, social backgrounds and cultural norms of their period. Moreover, literature transcends us the territories of time and place.

From the time immemorial, Indian English Literature brings its colours from our culture and tradition. Like other rich world-traditions, our Indian tradition also has been a land of myths and legends. Our ancient literature is a treasure of world fame epics, poetry, and scientific writings in Sanskrit and other regional languages but Indian English literature came into existence with the advent of British colonialism in India. During the interaction with British colonial literature, prominent Indian writers have developed their own literature in English language which was termed as Indian English Literature.

Existentialism in Indian English Fiction has its roots in Western existential philosophy as well as in Indian view of life “*The Gita*”. Since the dawn of the present era our modern civilization has been heading towards materialism, and so human life has been turning towards absurdism. So it becomes desirable for man to question himself who he is and why he has come into this world. In the stream of Western existentialism and Indian treasure of knowledge “*The Gita*,” modern men also have been suffering with existential dilemmas. Like modern men, Joshi’s fictional characters are also representatives of existential view of life in this absurd world. These protagonists are not only mentally wounded but also extremely puzzled at their situations in this meaningless universe. Thus, the problems of their lives seem to them so wide that they cannot be managed properly. Like Western existential literature, the modern Indian fiction also highlights alienated and isolated protagonists who are disconnected from their selves and society. Thus, the modern Indian English fictional characters portray modern men’s existential predicament.

### Existentialism in the Works of Arun Joshi:

After independence, Arun Joshi took the place of one of the most eminent writers among the younger generation of Indian English writers. He came into the limelight with his very first novel *The Foreigner* in 1968. He attracted the eyes of worldwide readers and critics with the publication of his first novel. Unlike his previous writers he neither wrote fiction for amusement nor for any social or scientific issues. He adopted the path of novel writing, for portraying the picture of human predicament, particularly the issues responsible for their freedom of choice and their effects on their psyche. In this way, Joshi explored deep into the psyche of his protagonists and sketched their mental sufferings and worldly anxiety in his fictional world. Thus, his protagonists oscillate between the two poles of their existence- Indian fostering and Western teachings and consequently suffer from their selves and society.

Arun Joshi was an eminent Indian English writer after Independence. He got the most prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his fourth novel *The Last Labyrinth* in 1982. He belonged to a learned family of eminent scholars in Varanasi (UP). During his studies in America, he got a B.S. degree from Kansas University and an M.S. degree from M.I.T. He got excellent experiences in America that gave a beautiful colour to his works. After his return to India, he worked at Delhi Cloth & General Mills as the head of its recruitment and training department. The name of his benevolent wife was Rukmini Lal who was a daughter of a shareholder. In 1965, he resigned from the post of the chief of D.C.M. but continued as the executive director of Shri Ram Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources in Delhi.

The fictional world of Arun Joshi mainly consists of five novels as: *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), and *The City and the River* (1990). In the line with Camus’ *The Outsider*, Joshi’s first novel *The Foreigner (TF)* excellently represents the world of western existentialism whereas in the world of Indian existentialism, it parallels with Anita Desai’s *‘Bye Bye Blackbird’*. It is, indeed, a realistic portrayal of worldly issues like love, marriage, suicide, detachment, and involvement that compel modern men to contemplate on these issues. It is a fictional trap of human predicament in which the protagonist, Sindi, struggles to arrive at reality in the midst of dense chaos and meaninglessness of life. So in the present novel, Sindi is concerned with the problems of modern men and seems to try his best to come out from this chaos.

In *The Foreigner (TF)*, Sindi Oberoi feels an isolation from the pre-given values and norms that roared in his locality. He reflects himself as some opportunity had created him without any predefined purpose of life. There is no predefined goal of life except what he assumes for himself. He feels that his alienation from the well-established social institutions lay within him and he could not leave it behind

whatever circumstances may arise. As he says: “My foreignness lay within me and I wouldn’t leave myself behind wherever I went.” (Joshi 55)

Sindi behaves as an existential hero: “rootless, restless and luckless, in a mad, bad and absurd world” (Guruprasad, 152). Sindi behaves as rootless: „rejects any predetermined purpose of life“, restless: „adopts the path of action in life“, and luckless: „highlights the theme- man is the maker of his own destiny“. He wants space, a capacity to love and the courage to live “without desire and attachment” (Joshi 120). In the beginning of the novel, Sindi’s view of existential life and love is in total rejection of the values resulting from human relations that signify to noninvolvement. In the words of Asnani: “Pleasure without involvement and love without possession are the values that condition the attitude and overall vision of Sindi”. (1978, 45) In his well-known slogan “Existence precedes essence”, Sartre rejects the Plato’s theory of idea about human being, which establishes the essence of man before his existence. Hence, man is devoid of any pre-given essence or norms that can help in making his destiny. Thus, for Sartre, man first of all comes in this world and then he makes his destiny through his actions and behaviours. Akin to Sartre, Sindi also highlights the theme of “Existence precedes essence”.

Being a man of mixed parentage, he has been left in this world to search for his roots and lead a meaningful life. He has no any pre-given essence to his life because he became an orphan at the age of four when his parents died in an air crash near Cairo. He was brought up by his uncle in Kenya, and was educated at first in East Africa and later in London and America. So, devoid of parental love, Sindi is totally indifferent to a universal human nature and this is evident when he says: “For the hundredth time I related the story of those strangers whose only reality were a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs...” (Joshi 9) After the death of his uncle, Sindi has completely been left alone in this world to choose his path and do his duty. So in the words of Sartre, he, first of all, establishes himself in this world, struggles with the surrounding and then gives meaning to his life. At the death of his uncle he finds himself confronting a deep sense of insecurity which makes him move away from involvement and commitment in day-to-day life. As he says: “After his (uncle’s) death the security was destroyed. Now I suppose I existed only for dying...” (Joshi, 61) Like Sartre’s “Man simply is”, Sindi is greatly obsessed by his own rootlessness, and calls himself “An uprooted young man living in the latter half of the twentieth century who had detached from everything except myself”. (Joshi, 195)

In his existential view of life, Sindi is akin to Sartre’s existential creature *Pour-soi* (being-for-itself) because he survives from nothingness. In the stream of Sartre’s „human beings have no model or blueprint of any universal human nature to copy it. Sindi is devoid of any respect for society, and has belief in neither God nor religion. So, he feels an isolation and alienation from his social milieu: “I have no roots. I have no system of morality,” (Joshi, 139) and Sindi does not believe even in marriage relationship and social morality. According to him, marriage is more often a lust for possession than anything else; and on one occasion when June persuades him to marry her, he replies: “Marriage wouldn’t help, June... You can’t send two persons through a ceremony and expect that their aloneness will disappear.” (Joshi, 124) In the stream of Sartrean existentialism, Sindi opines that the greatest tragedy in life is not death but to live with any fixed purpose in life or live a life of puppet of determinism. For Sindi, what an individual becomes eventually in life is not absolutely what God wants him or her to become. Whatever man becomes in life is what his choices, decisions, actions, and hard works have made him into. Like Sartre, Sindi says that it is man who builds up the world by his actions.

In *The Foreigner*, Sindi, confronted with various problems and stress of life, understands that the greatest achievement in life is not detachment but selfless involvement to make his own destiny. In the

search for meaning to life, he reaches at a point where he is shocked to find that he is no longer the maker of his destiny and realises that there are so many forces which threaten to wither his life and all its joys and hopes. At this juncture, he suffers from a deep sense of powerlessness and meaninglessness. But with the help of Catholic priest and factory worker Muthu, his life takes a turn. In the words of Muthu: "But it is not involvement, Sir sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved". (Joshi, 225) So, the novel shows the Sindi's journey from inaction to action, detachment to involvement, and illusion to reality as in Sartrean terminology he is not something (*being-in-itself*) but nothing (*being-for-itself*). Further like Sartre, Sindi also highlights that human personality is not a result of an incident of fate but a continuous accumulation of his own actions. He is not what his fate has made him. He is what he chooses in his life. As it is obvious that his parentage and early life made him a nowhere man. But only by his sincere efforts, he travels journey from a sense of detachment to a selfless involvement to overcome his painful past and to take an active responsibility for the goodness of mankind. In this way, his open discussion with a Catholic priest in Scotland makes him to realise that one "can love without attachment, without desire". (Joshi, 170) So, he attains the goal of peace within and without emanating from a sense of man's capability to produce his own fate: "Mr. Sindi Oberoi a man totally alienated from his surroundings and society and even from his love turns out to be the savior of factoryworkers". (A.N. Dwivedi) For Sartre, existentialism begins in subjectivity because there can be no other truth to begin with than Descartes' *Cogito*, the moment when we become aware of ourselves. Subjectivity gives the dignity to human being by distinguishing him from everything else because we are not an object but a subject. Like Sartre, Sindi also opines that subjectivity rather than objectivity must be the starting point in the project of understanding the meaning of human life.

According to him, human being is a subject rather than an object, a living being rather than a thing. Throughout the novel, it is obvious that Sindi's objectivity (his character, personality, identity, etc.) is a product of his own actions and therefore he is the product of his subjectivity. In other words, we can say that Sindi does not cross the limit of his subjectivity and always confines himself in the realm of his subjectivity. In this way, being an individual he is always ready to alter his objective standing in the world, and change himself and his existential circumstances. In the garb of his subjectivity, Sindi demonstrates that his world is his own construction, and it is what it is as a result of his own choices and actions. Here, Sindi is of the view that "one should be able to detach oneself from the object of one's love" (Joshi, 171) and retains one's subjectivity in any circumstances.

On his return to India, Sindi, still a foreigner, is given a job by Khemka's father in his firm. It is Sheila, Khemka's sister who gives him a sense of commitment in life. Sindi rightly says: "Circumstances and events had led to my detachment from all of them. But, as Sheila had pointed I couldn't be detached from the world and remain attached to myself." (Joshi, 164) June's remarks are almost accurate to Sindi's alienation and isolation from his self and society: "There is something strange about you, you know, something distant". (Joshi, 33) In his early life Sindi does not try to settle down his familial and social life and consequently becomes an ideal foreigner.

***The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (BB)*** is a fine story of a foreign educated sensitive person who struggles throughout his life in the remote area of central India in search of a meaningful life. In the present novel, Billy highlights the most relevant voice of existentialism that it is nearly impossible to specify the place of man in this absurd world because it is dynamic in nature. According to him, what is desirable in this world is to choose our own goal and way of living and live accordingly. He feels everywhere alienated and isolated in this so-called civilized society even in his own familial life. This sense of alienation and isolation can be seen in his letter to Tuula Lindgren: "It seems, my dear Tuula that we are swiftly losing what is

known as one's grip on life. Why else this constant blurring of reality? Who am I? Who are my parents?" (Joshi, 5) Thus, he frankly adopts his goal of life in the forest of *Maikala Hills* and lives accordingly.

Modern civilization seems to him a worthless accumulation of materialistic men. It is devoid of good qualities and humanistic attitude. He argues with learned persons if modern civilization is more than earning and spending. In his view, these so-called civilized persons do nothing better than wild animals. So, he reflects in these words: "I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending of money." (Joshi, 97) Here, Billy knocks down the barriers of a well-established materialistic society and sees deeper into the depth of human life. During his efforts to join the primitive world, he realises that his love for the Maikala Hills is only a step towards his spiritual awakenings, his realisation of the inner most soul, his existentialist pursuit to know the meaning and values of life. He argues with the narrator Romi what the actual cause behind his emergence in this primitive world is. He explains to Romi that for these realisations and awakenings his whole life is designed. He assures the narrator to become a primitive is not the end of his life but a means to know the treasure behind human life.

*The Apprentice (TA)*, Joshi's third novel, is a parable of a modern man who goes through the lanes of unemployment, employment, corruption and repentance. Its protagonist is a man who starts his life with his father's Gandhian ideology and suffers with his mother's view of utilitarianism and finally survives with his selfless actions. In this way, he highlights the Sartrean view of life that man can change his destiny by the choices taken in his life. Having taken the post of a civil servant, he does everything what all civil servants do in the era of post-colonial India. But in the final pages of the novel he turns towards the Gandhian ideology and cleans shoes at the door step of a temple. In the novel, Ratan oscillates between the two poles of his father's Gandhian ideology and his mother's view of utilitarianism. The tension created between these poles gives the existential colour to the novel. Here, Ratan Rathor frequently changes his attitude towards the standards of human life. He wants to lead an authentic life but the living standards of his colleagues compel him to take a huge bribe in the war office. So, the prevalent corruption in the modern society forces him to accept the materialistic view of life. He is, further, shocked to see the corruption in the temple because *pujari* of the temple is also engrossed in it.

In the present novel, Ratan's mother is a rational woman who always thinks about the future of her son. That is why she compels him to become a man of world and make personal properties for a better future. She affirms her view in the direction of rational life "... it was not the patriotism but the money that brought respect and brought the security". (Joshi, 18) In the pursuit of her mother's teachings about life, he realises that he is approaching in a wrong direction and so feels helpless like Sartrean puppet. It is the impact of her mother's utilitarianism that living in the world becomes more important for him than the Gandhian ideals of life. In the struggle to establish himself in society, he becomes a man of practical and selfish attitude. In the initial stage of his service it was a matter of survival, but after some time it became mere indulgence. In these circumstances, Ratan could not understand that once a man starts lying and deceiving, he would be forced to continue it. In this way, it would be very difficult for him to come out from the pool of corruption. As he declares boldly: "... I did not need the money. I am quite sure of that... but I need it neither for survival nor happiness." (Joshi 58)

Joshi's fourth novel *The Last Labyrinth (LL)* really highlights the conflict between reason and faith. Name of the novel is self-explanatory in the sense that protagonist of the novel, Som Bhaskar, oscillates between the reason of Leela Sabnis and the faith of Anuradha. The story of the present novel is designed in the colours of mystery and darkness of human life. The whole story of the novel coordinates not only with reason and materialism of modern society, but also with love and affection of humanity. Thus, it provides



the path of salvation to modern society. In the beginning, it is a story of huge confusing lanes of Benaras but finally it ends with the faith in God.

Som Bhaskar, protagonist of the novel, is a man of multiple characteristics. His grandfather had worldly temperament and “was a man- about- town, a gourmet, fond of women and drink”. (Joshi, 143) On the other hand, his father had scientific temperament and was “a scientist and had delved more deeply into truths that lie at the heart of the universe”. (Joshi, 148) So Som has inherited the characteristics of both, the worldly temperament of his grandfather and the scientific nature of his father to search for the first cause from “whence and how arose the universe”. (Joshi, 142) Though his father has taught him out of his experiences that “science cannot solve the problem of the causes,” (Joshi, 112) nothing attracted Som “more than the secrets of the universe”. (Joshi, 117) Under the impact of this double inheritance, he is not ready to accept the existence of anything that cannot be proved logically. In this way, reality for him is only empirical because “evidence is of course important”. (Joshi 27)

Here, Som struggles in a world of faith and reason with a sense of existential alienation and loneliness. The present novel probes deep into his turbulent inner psyche where he doubts to adopt the path of reason or faith to know the first cause of universe. This is the main reason why he is continuously chased by unrecognized hunger. Throughout the story, he is haunted by unknown desires and voices: “audible only to my ear, a gray cry threshed the night air: I want. I want. I want”. (Joshi, 9) In this way, Som tries his best to search the cause of happiness and meaningfulness of human life. The riddle of life and death; faith and reason always haunt him throughout his life. No doubt, like his father, Som is caught by the thought of death: “... there was nothing I loathed more than I loathed the sight of death”. (Joshi 15) Despite this he always wants to know its secret. Thus, the whole story of the novel revolves around Som’s confrontation with the darkness of death and sufferings in *Lal- Haveli* and ends at the threshold of faith in God.

*The City and the River (CR)* is Joshi’s fifth and last novel which deals with the general cause of society rather than the individuality of a particular character. It illustrates the painful story of a modern city which is governed by a dictator and his Council of Advisors. It also deals with the pathetic story of poor boatmen who struggle against the bad faith of the Grand Master of the city. The novel revolves around the sufferings that the Head boatman begets upon herself and her poor boatmen adopt it by taking oath against the rule of the Grand Master of the city. It illustrates a modern city equipped with laser guns, helicopters, missiles and electronic media along with the huts of the mud people devoid of any modern equipment. Moreover, in the present novel, instead of making a direct portrayal of characters, novelist has used allegorical technique and method. Most of the characters in the novel such as the Grand Master, the Professor, Grandfather, the Head boatman etc. are nameless and represent abstract attitudes and beliefs.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that Arun Joshi probes deep into the psyche of his protagonists and highlights their interactions with the Sartrean view of life. Through his protagonists, he portrays the inner recesses and existential trauma of modern men and deals with their efforts to search a meaning of life in this materialistic world. The problem of alienation and isolation from self and society is a major issue in his fictional world. He demonstrates that the Sartrean view of life is scattered everywhere in his novels. With the advent of Sartrean slogan: “*Existence precedes essence*,” man is continuously trying to establish himself into the centre of universe instead of the ethical notion of God. In the line with Sartre, Joshi’s protagonists beautifully demonstrate that man exists first in this world and defines himself afterwards. In the pursuit of meaning to their lives, they try to establish what is right or wrong in this materialistic world. Pursuing the path of Sartrean view of life, they regulate their day to day life in a disciplined way but an inclination with deterministic view of life leads them to bad faith. By their struggle to know the actual

meaning of life, they transfer the scientific view of life to those who are continuously searching for the meaning of life in this absurd world

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