

# Existential Consciousness and Modern Disillusionment in Arun Joshi's Novels

Neha Singh<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Krishna Murari Singh<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English,  
Binod Bihari Mahto Koyalanchal University, Dhanbad

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English,  
Binod Bihari Mahto Koyalanchal University, Dhanbad

**Abstract**— Arun Joshi stands as a prominent voice in Indian English fiction, celebrated for his deeply introspective storytelling that explores the inner turmoil of modern individuals. His novels are characterized by profound existential concerns, capturing the sense of dislocation and psychological unrest experienced by people navigating the crossroads of tradition and modernity. Set against the backdrop of a society undergoing rapid cultural transformation and globalization, Joshi's protagonists frequently emerge as alienated, emotionally estranged figures searching for meaning and identity in an increasingly impersonal world. This study carries out a critical analysis of existentialism and alienation as central themes in Joshi's key novels *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, *The Apprentice*, and *The Last Labyrinth*. The exploration of psychological intricacies of his characters, the study reveals how Joshi raises fundamental existential questions related to selfhood, freedom, and spiritual desolation. Further, the research highlights how Joshi integrates elements of Western existentialist philosophy with Indian metaphysical traditions, resulting in a unique narrative approach that enriches the landscape of Indian English literature.

**Index Terms**— Arun Joshi, Indian English Literature, Existentialism, Alienation, Psychological conflict, Identity crisis, Modernity and tradition, Spiritual emptiness, Inner disintegration.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Arun Joshi deeply engaged with existentialist ideas, both from Western and Indian traditions. These themes run strongly through all his novels. To understand Joshi's distinct place in existentialist writing, it's helpful to first look at the key ideas of Western existentialism. A major idea in Western

existentialist thought is that a person's existence comes before any defined purpose or essence. This belief grew out of a crisis in moral and spiritual values in the late 19th century, especially after Friedrich Nietzsche famously declared that "God is dead." This led to a world where humans felt alone in a universe with no divine presence. While science could explain how nature works, it couldn't provide reasons for why we exist or what our purpose might be.

In such an absurd world, people feel fear, confusion, loneliness, and deep anxiety. This fear is not just fear of death, but a fear tied to the meaning of life itself. Without belief in God, individuals are left to take full responsibility for their lives. They must find their own way to deal with the emptiness and fear that come with existence. Existential thinkers encourage people to look deeply into their own lives, to truly experience existence, and to understand the full meaning of their choices. According to them, a person cannot run away from life or self; instead, they must go through it as a journey shaped by personal decisions. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), seen as the founding figure of existentialism, spoke about the person who stands in fear and uncertainty as they face life's biggest and most troubling questions.

## II. CRISIS, ABSURDITY, AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Existentialism focuses on ideas like loneliness, being true to oneself (authenticity), anxiety, despair, death, and the absurd nature of life. It sees human beings as trapped by mortality and separated from others, often feeling deep emotional and spiritual isolation.

Existentialist thought became most powerful after World War II, a time of great violence and tragedy. This is because existentialism tries to answer life's most basic and serious questions about life, death, personal identity, and the modern human condition. It shows modern individuals as alone and struggling to come to terms with their place in a confusing and indifferent world.

Existentialist writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus focused strongly on the role of the individual in any life situation. Most existentialist literature leans toward atheism, highlighting the emptiness of human life and viewing death and the lack of meaning in existence as unavoidable truths. This kind of literature often carries a pessimistic tone life is seen as without meaning or purpose, and the individual is portrayed as a lonely figure in a confusing world, struggling with fear and hopelessness in a reality where illusions have been stripped away. However, existentialism also emphasizes that human beings are free and have the ability to shape their lives through their own choices.

Sartre and Camus believed that even in an irrational and absurd world, human freedom remains intact. With this freedom comes total responsibility for one's choices and actions. The devastating wars and mass killings of the early twentieth century only deepened the sense of meaninglessness, fear, and despair. In response, existentialists tried to find ways to help humans deal with the pain and absurdity of life. They proposed that a person has three possible reactions to the absurd: one, to end their life; two, to live in self-deception; or three, to accept the absurd and confront it with courage and honesty.

Camus supports the third path. He believes that a person should accept that life is absurd but continue to live fully, without illusions. This acceptance means choosing to live despite the meaninglessness, and finding strength in rebellion against the absurd. Sartre echoed this idea with his famous line that "Man is condemned to be free," meaning that people have no choice but to take charge of their freedom and choices. The individual who faces this truth, makes meaningful choices, and lives by personal values without harming the freedom of others is called an authentic being. Such a person's freedom becomes their true moral identity.

### III. SINDI OBEROI: ALIENATION AND EMOTIONAL DETACHMENT IN THE FOREIGNER

In *The Foreigner*, Sindi Oberoi epitomizes the alienated modern individual spiritually adrift and emotionally insulated. His confession, "I have always found it difficult to belong. To any group. Any sect. Any society" (Joshi, 32), is not merely a personal reflection but a statement of profound existential detachment. Sindi is the product of a cross-cultural background an Indian father and a Western mother and his upbringing across various countries only intensifies his sense of cultural displacement. He is suspended between East and West, belonging fully to neither, echoing what Martin Heidegger termed *Unheimlichkeit*, or the uncanny sense of "not being at home." This alienation is not simply geographical or cultural; it is deeply metaphysical a condition of being fundamentally estranged in the world, where no institution, identity, or relationship offers grounding. Arun Joshi uses Sindi's condition to reflect the crisis of postcolonial modernity, where inherited values are questioned, and new ones fail to satisfy the deeper spiritual yearnings of the self.

Sindi's alienation also manifests in his interpersonal relationships. His reluctance to form lasting bonds is a defense against emotional vulnerability and moral responsibility. He deliberately maintains surface-level engagements to shield himself from deeper ethical dilemmas. His statement "Good, bad these are words that people have invented." (Joshi, 64) reveals a nihilistic or at least relativistic worldview, in line with Nietzsche's critique of moral absolutism. Like Meursault in Camus's *The Stranger*, Sindi is apathetic toward societal norms and expectations, refusing to play roles that demand emotional investment. When June offers him love and connection, Sindi withdraws not because of arrogance or cruelty, but because of a deeper existential anxiety. This is what Jean-Paul Sartre would describe as "bad faith": a refusal to accept one's freedom and responsibility by hiding behind self-imposed emotional detachment. Sindi fears that committing to love, or any relationship, would mean giving up his inner autonomy or being judged by external standards. In this way, he embodies the existential anti-hero a man aware of the absurdity of existence but immobilized by it.

However, Arun Joshi does not leave Sindi in a state of static despair. Over the course of the novel, there is a gradual but significant transformation in his inner world. Though initially indifferent, Sindi's decision to help Babu despite no obligation marks a moral shift. His justification, "I only know what gives me peace" (Joshi, 64), reflects an emerging personal ethic rooted not in social norms but in internal conscience. This moment is key to understanding Sindi's existential awakening. Like the existentialists who argue that meaning must be self-created in a meaningless universe, Sindi chooses to act not out of duty, but from a sense of internal truth. His movement from passive observation to ethical engagement mirrors what Camus calls "revolt" a conscious choice to confront the absurd rather than succumb to it. Sindi does not find salvation through religion or ideology, but through small, meaningful actions that affirm life despite its uncertainties. Joshi thus positions him as an Indian existential figure, negotiating the fractured landscape of postcolonial identity, emotional detachment, and spiritual yearning. By the novel's end, Sindi does not achieve wholeness in a conventional sense, but he begins to accept responsibility and seek authenticity in his own quiet way making *The Stranger* not only a story of alienation but also of moral renewal.

#### IV. THE REJECTION OF RATIONAL MODERNITY IN THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS

Billy Biswas, the protagonist of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, emerges as Arun Joshi's most radical existential figure one who actively rejects the trappings of modernity to pursue a deeper, more authentic life. Born into an affluent, Westernized Indian family and educated abroad, Billy initially appears to embody postcolonial success. Yet beneath this carefully crafted image lies a growing inner conflict a profound split between the life he is expected to lead and the life his spirit craves. His powerful declaration, "I am not what I seem. I have never been. My real self is buried deep in the forests" (Joshi, 60), resonates deeply with Kierkegaard's idea of the "true self," which must be discovered through inner confrontation rather than through societal acceptance.

Billy's withdrawal from urban life and his immersion into tribal existence is symbolic of what Albert Camus described as a revolt against the absurd. The meaningless routines of elite society "cocktail parties, bridge games, and hunting weekends" (Joshi, 76) represent for Billy a life emptied of essence. These activities, governed by social pretense and capitalist consumerism, contrast sharply with the raw, unfiltered existence of tribal life. His statement, "I wanted something more primitive, more elemental," expresses a longing not for regression, but for spiritual renewal. In this sense, the forest becomes more than a setting it becomes a metaphor for existential freedom, a space where Billy can shed the false layers of his imposed identity. His decision to leave behind civilization "I had to go, Romi. There was no other way. I could no longer live in a world where the spirit had died" (Joshi, 45) is a Kierkegaardian leap of faith, an act of radical commitment to one's inner truth, even at the cost of security, comfort, and ultimately, life itself. Heidegger's notion of escaping the *Das Man* the anonymous, conformist self is vividly enacted in Billy's transformation from social being to spiritual seeker.

Billy's rejection of love and emotional intimacy "Love? I do not know what that means. It sounds like a disease, a kind of fever" (Joshi, 72) exposes a deeper existential wound. His inability to form conventional emotional bonds signals not cruelty, but a radical vulnerability and disconnection from a world whose values no longer speak to him. In this, Billy closely mirrors Meursault from Camus's *The Stranger*, who too lives outside societal emotional scripts and pays the price for his truthfulness. Billy's death in the forest, while physically tragic, is existentially redemptive. His refusal to compromise with society, to conform to roles and rituals that feel inauthentic, leads him to a kind of spiritual clarity. As Romi reflects, "He was a man who walked out of our world in search of a truth we could not see" (Joshi, 75). In death, Billy achieves what Nietzsche might call the affirmation of life through the courage to live out one's will, regardless of outcome.

## V. MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE APPRENTICE

Ratan Rathor, the protagonist of *The Apprentice*, reflects the figure of the morally compromised modern man, caught in the web of self-deception, guilt, and reluctant introspection. A minor bureaucrat in the Indian civil system, Ratan embodies the ethical decay and spiritual confusion of a society where ideals have been replaced by opportunism. His haunting memory “Every night the ledgers haunted me rows of numbers whispering my betrayal” (Joshi, 57) serves as a potent metaphor for his internal collapse. The ledgers are no longer mere bureaucratic tools; they become symbols of the soul's silent indictment. Much like Dostoevsky's guilt-ridden characters, Ratan cannot silence the inner voice of conscience. Joshi aligns Ratan's spiritual anguish with the existential idea that guilt is not imposed externally but arises from one's failure to live in accordance with one's authentic values. In Joshi's existential universe, guilt is a form of awakening a first confrontation with the truth of one's choices and their moral implications.

Ratan's alienation is not geographic like Sindi's or metaphysical like Billy's it is deeply psychological and social. Despite working in a bustling government office, he feels isolated: “I sat among colleagues yet remained a stranger my soul barred behind the doors of my deceit” (Joshi, 89). This confessional admission echoes Sartre's notion of “bad faith” a condition where individuals lie to themselves to escape the burden of freedom and responsibility. Ratan's outer self, masked by professionalism and polite detachment, hides an inner life marked by shame and regret. His alienation is self-created; he cannot relate to others because he cannot forgive himself. Unlike Billy Biswas, who revolts and escapes society, Ratan remains trapped in its structures, consumed by the guilt of ethical compromise. His attempts to blame fate or systemic pressures are gradually dismantled as he begins to realize that he made conscious choices small decisions that eventually eroded his moral center. Joshi masterfully shows that alienation, in Ratan's case, is not just from society but from the self he failed to honor.

The existential arc of Ratan Rathor is subtle yet powerful. At first, he justifies his corruption as a practical necessity a means of surviving within a system already diseased. But as the novel progresses,

Joshi takes us through Ratan's internal landscape, revealing a man increasingly aware that his rationalizations are hollow. He confronts the Sartrean truth: “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself.” His epiphany lies in the painful realization that he could have acted differently and that the consequences are his to bear. In contrast to Billy, who seeks authenticity through rejection, Ratan chooses a quieter path of redemption. He cannot undo the past, but he can act responsibly in the present. His decision to advise a young apprentice against repeating his mistakes becomes his first authentic act a small but significant movement toward existential freedom. In *The Apprentice*, Arun Joshi presents an existential narrative rooted not in rebellion, but in reflection and ethical reparation. Ratan's journey is emblematic of modern man's entanglement with bureaucracy, ambition, and compromised integrity. But unlike nihilistic resignation, Joshi offers a space for growth even if painfully slow and incomplete. Ratan does not transcend his guilt, but he begins to live with it honestly, which, in the existential framework, is the beginning of authenticity.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Arun Joshi's novels offer a compelling exploration of existentialism and alienation, blending Western philosophical insights with Indian spiritual, ethical, and cultural dimensions. Though his narratives have received critical recognition, there remains a notable gap in examining how his portrayal of alienation extends beyond personal psychological turmoil to encompass wider collective, political, and metaphysical implications particularly in *The City and the River* and *The Apprentice*. Through nuanced characters like Sindi Oberoi, Billy Biswas, Ratan Rathor, Som Bhaskar, and the Boatman, Joshi reveals the struggle of individuals caught between societal expectations and inner authenticity, rational thought and intuitive understanding, consumerism and spiritual depth. While earlier criticism has largely highlighted the psychological intricacies in his work, this study expands that focus by situating Joshi's existential themes within broader paradigms ethical dilemmas, postcolonial identity, and Indian metaphysical traditions. In *The Foreigner*, Sindi finds a semblance of peace through emotional detachment and moral introspection learning to let go like the flow

of a river. In *The Apprentice*, Ratan discovers that true integrity lies not in external systems but within the self. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Billy abandons urban falsity in search of something elemental and untouched. The motif of the river becomes a powerful symbol in Joshi's fiction standing for time, self-realization, inner freedom, and liberation from illusion and rigidity. It becomes a counterpoint to the mechanized, lifeless urban sphere where authenticity is often sacrificed. Ultimately, Joshi's fiction not only portrays the existential alienation of the modern individual but also opens pathways to inner freedom through self-examination, rebellion, and spiritual insight offering a distinctively Indian perspective to the broader discourse of existential literature.

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