

## A Critical Study of Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*

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In Arun Joshi's first novel *The Foreigner* itself, Joshi analyses the problem of meaninglessness in life. The protagonist Sindi's alienation is of the soul and not the geography. Right from the beginning, he is oppressed by a desire to find the meaning of life and his entire life is geared around his quest for performance in life. In the very beginning of their encounter June tells Sindi:

*There is something strange about you, you know. Something distant. I'd guess that when people are with you they don't 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.*

The foreigner echoes the palpation of life. A gentle tale, centering round the various aspects of life brings out the verve of longing, the pain of detachment and above all the mystic realities of experiencing life.

The author Arun Joshi is an Indian born in 1939. He attended schools in India as well as in United States. He was the director of Shri Ram centre for industrial relations. Arun Joshi is a novelist of great merit and as an author of rare sensitivity. In every creation of the author his instinctive ability to articulate the feelings of the post-independence Indians trapped between the Indian ethos and western influences reveals in a great way. In many of his writings it reveals his psychological insight and understanding of the inner lives of the surrounded protagonists. The study has been made comprehensive enough to reveal the various perspectives of Joshi's novels. Arun Joshi is an original writer whose writing always gets praises from the world literature.

Arun Joshi has emerged as an important Indo-English novelist with the publication of his first novel, *The Foreigner*. In an enthusiastic review, Kale Morsch refers to *The Foreigner* as "one of the finest novels to come out of India" and goes on to compliment the author for presenting from within, a view that is "tumultuously open and never boring." However, she recognises the competence of the novelist in realising the theme as the novel is "ruthless, compassionate, shocking and sometimes downright brutal." Murali Das Melwani believes that the novel examines the effects of alienation on sensitive Indians of mixed heritage, as the protagonist in *The Foreigner* is an alien everywhere since he shares three cultures.

*The Foreigner* by Arun Joshi was published by Vision or Orient Paperbacks. This creation of Arun Joshi is an analytical story. The author's critical thinking was there while writing the book. He is a great writer with varied ideas. This book deals with some intricacies of life like all of us are alone in this world. The people can be surrounded by thousands of men but

as a whole they are alone. At the time of leaving the world all have to go alone. This universal truth has come up with this story by Arun Joshi.

Arun Joshi one of the most prominent Indo-English writers of Post colonial Era of Indian Literary arena, has bequeathed five novels and a collection of dozen short stories to be embedded with widened thematic and stylistic scopes. Indeed, psychology has been used as a powerful instrument by Joshi to bring out the mental aberration suffered by most of his protagonists, but not more. Though his writings superficially resemble those of Western existentialist writers who harp on the futility and negation of life and existence divine, Joshi is deeply preoccupied with bringing out the essence of Indian ethos whose role is inevitable in all facets of life not only for the ancient ones, but also for the baffled contemporary youngster, whether he be Indian or alien.

There is no denying that the root of existential thoughts is traced back to pre-philosophical era. Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible, Buddhism and Upanishads, mainly all oriental concepts contain deep existential insights of communion mode, not of fragmentation and desolation. Solomon, the preacher king says in Ecclesiastes:

*One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; yet the earth abideth for ever... The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the Sun... for in much wisdom is much grief; and he that increased knowledge increased sorrow... Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me. For all is vanity and vexation. (1:4)*

So, bearing in mind that Existentialism in the modern context is an old wine in a new cup, a new name for an ancient method of Buddhism and Upanishads which insist only on the knowledge of self, this analysis is based on the fact that Man, being a victim of ignorance of his innate tenderness of morality becomes selfish which leads to a sense of blankness over the spirit that makes the world a waste and a vain show.

*The Foreigner* by Arun Joshi is about the human relation and its various aspects. The central character of the story is Sindi Oberoi and the story revolves around his loneliness and feelings of anguish and anxiety born of his estrangement from his environment, tradition and his true self. In this story the young hero after experiencing life and love in America comes back in Delhi. And eventually persuaded by a humble office worker that sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved. This Surinder Oberoi is detached, almost alienated man who sees himself as a stranger wherever he lives or goes. He feels the same in every place e.g. in Kenya where he is born, in England and USA where he is a student and in India where he finally settles. His detachment transcends barriers of geography, nationality and culture as well. It propels him from one crisis to another, sucking in the wake several other people, including June, an attractive American with whom he has a short lived but passionate affair. Babu is another character who forms the third vertex of their doomed love triangle.

In *The Foreigner*, the story is told in a series of flashbacks with a clever ordering of past events to maximise suspense. Though the narrative includes Babu, an Indian student in America, June, a simple and passionate American girl, Mr. Khemka, a Delhi industrialist, the novel is in the main the story of Sindi Oberoi - a rootless young man. The story is narrated from Sindi's point of view. The division of the novel orders the events, as the first part lights up the beginning of relationships, the second growth and decay, and the last, defeat and destruction.

The prime concern of the novelist is with the gradual evolution of Sindi Oberoi from a negative philosophy of detachment to its positive aspect. In the beginning Sindi depends on his own philosophy of non-involvement for happiness, which results in the death of Babu and June.

But he slowly learns that real detachment from men and matters comes when one performs one's duty sincerely without any desire for the result, as laid down in *The Gita*.

For the first few weeks he works strenuously late at night and with the co-operation of all the employees sets the establishment in order. He involves himself with a positive detachment because "*the fruit of it was not his concern*". Babu with the self-pity, Mr. Khemka with his meaningless materialistic preoccupation, Sheila, living on the brink of life but never entering it, and Sindi himself afraid of commitment, never confront life in its fulness. It is disinterested involvement alone which can break through the selfish instincts of self-preservation and bridge the gap between appearance and reality.

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. Impressed by the authenticity and insightful peering into agonised psyche, Meenakshi Mukherjee comments that-

*The Foreigner is the first Indo - Anglian novel to deal with a genuine human predicament without compromise and without cliches, since Anita Desai's Voices in the City.*

Sindi's detached view of life and the world, his typical relationships with others make him akin to Albert Camus Meursauh in *The Outsider*, as the title of the novel, *The Foreigner*, also suggests. If Meursauh "the stranger" is an Algerian Frenchman, Sindi Oberoi "the foreigner" is a Kenya - born Indian. At times there is a similar reproduction of Camus words in *The Foreigner*. C. N. Srinath points out that June, Babu, Sheila, Mr. Khemka -- all these come alive in this small world of foreigners. For each of them is a foreigner in a sense.

Among the Indian English Writers who qualify as existentialist, Arun Joshi is one of the supreme novelists whose novels are strongly influenced by the existential philosophy. His journey of fictional works is characterized by a sense of alienation and existential predicament. His novels consistently record the sensitivity, assessment and declarations about life. Joshi's fictional work comes across with nothingness and the tenuousness of human existence of modern life and depicts that man is shocked to find that he is no longer the master of his destiny and there are forces, which threaten to wither his life and all its joys and hopes.

Arun Joshi's concept of detachment as expounded through Sindi Oberoi appears to be closer to the one explicated by Aldous Huxley, Huxley believes that the ideal man is the non-attached man and his non-attachment is negative only in name. The practice of non-attachment entails the practice of charity, courage, generosity and disinterestedness. Non-attachment imposes the adoption of an intensely positive attitude towards the world. The non-attached man puts an end to pain, not only in himself: but also, to such pain as he may inflict, on others. He thus qualifies to be "blessed" and "good".

Sindi is the kind of foreigner who feels the pangs of his foreignness in '*any circumstance and any country*'. He has merely learnt to be detached from the world. I saw myself as I had always been an uprooted young man living in the latter half of the twentieth century who had become detached from everything expects myself. (195) the prominent characters in the novel, suffer from existential predicament for different reasons. Arun Joshi exposes the stretch of this sordid society, by ripping of the masks and exposing the inner core of a human being. In his search for new themes, Joshi has renowned the larger world in favour of the inner man and has engaged himself in "*a search for the essence of human living*". Most of the characters of Arun Joshi's novels totally give the impression of loneliness, separation, hypocrisy, and absence of individuality.

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Joshi’s maiden novel *The Foreigner* relates the psycho aberration of Surrinder Oberoi, called Sindi throughout the novel till the misled selfish protagonist turns into Surrender Oberoi after undergoing intolerable loss out of his false brutal detachment and egoistic stand. Being orphaned at an early childhood and eventual death of his uncle, his escapade in love-affairs in his adolescence, Babu’s death, June’s demise with her child in the womb have driven Sindi mad beyond retreat. Though, at last, in his ancestor’s land, Muthu a simpleton drives firmly, the true *Karamayogic* spiritual principle bequeathed in *The Bagwad Gita* by Lord Krishna to Arjuna as well as to the whole human race in the past, present and future too.

A man owes much to the society into which he is born for having accommodated him. Evasiveness and escapism, as of Sindi never suits an honest person. One should render services in all possible and practicable ways in order to repay the dues to the world. Abandonment of all desire prompted action is true renunciation. Muthu says to Sindi persuading the latter to take up the dwindling business of Khemka saying that-

*“sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved” (225).*

*The Foreigner* reveals the author’s keen awareness of a deeper social reality of our times. Freedom in the sense of being unfettered, freedom from the craving for holding on to things and one’s ego, is the condition for love and for productive being. He later laments-

*“Detachment at that time meant inaction. Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachments consisted of right action and not escape from it. The Gods had set a heavy price to teach me just that” (188-189).*

Sindi strives to walk out of his illusions.

Joshi, along with many right thinking stalwarts regrets the malignant tendency of Indian youth in blindly mimicking materialism. No one is to get drunk on one’s own logic losing all value and respect for the exorbitant spiritual dimensions for Joshi believes that, generally, a person who is honestly oriented in the spiritual path gets well placed in a life of contentment and prosperity. There is only one duty and that is the duty of happiness and good work. This is the reason for our being here.

One of the most significant contemporary Indian Novelists writing in English, Arun Joshi has not just focused on social or political problems but on the deeper layer of man’s being. The novelist himself is very clear about his intent “My novels essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and myself”. His explorations into the complexities of life impinging on the individual forces one to think, contemplate or affirm the strategies of survival evolved or practiced by an individual in particular and the society in general.

Sindi of *The Foreigner* is a product of multiple continents, born in Africa to an Indian father and an English mother, brought up by his Indian uncle, educated in England and America,

feels always a 'nowhere man' who finally gets his anchorage in his ancestral home India, after a long struggle in loneliness and misconstrued detachment of inaction.

The typical confused state of a postmodern youth, who is always amidst crowds but always alone, is depicted. When June Blyth sees him for the first time in a party with all the dancing and drinking around, wherein, Sindi is the ex-officio host, she asks-

*"Why do you look so sad?" (The Foreigner 22).*

The turbulent inner world of the protagonist is delineated in this interesting novel. Sindi is painfully aware of-

*"twenty-five years largely wasted in search of peace, and what did I have to show for achievement: a ten-stone body that had to be fed four times a day, twenty-five times a week. This was a sum of a lifetime of striving."*

*(The Foreigner 92)*

*"Death wipes out everything, for most of us anyway. All that is a big mocking zero" (92).*

*The Foreigner* reveals Joshi's keen awareness of a deeper social reality of our times. Freedom in the sense of being unfettered, freedom from the craving for holding on to things and one's ego, is the condition for love and for productive being. Sindi later laments, "Detachment at that time meant inaction. Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it. The Gods had set a heavy price to teach me just that" (188-189). He strives to walk out of his illusions. He takes refuge in Occidental and Oriental philosophies. It is apparent that Oriental philosophy has a strong hold on him when he states:

*"All love -- whether of things, or persons, or oneself -- was illusion and all pain sprang from this illusion. Love begot greed and attachment, and it led to possession." (180).*

Another trait found in the novel is traces of Marxism. Class-consciousness and class-conflict find immense say. Babu is scared of his father who is very much concerned about their upper class, attitude that a foreign educated son would add to his status and fetch a richer daughter-in-law. The living standards of the Khemkas differ dramatically with that of his employees. Sindi is amazed at the exquisite interior decoration of the palatial house of the Khemkas and shocked at the one room residence of Muthu, accommodating a dozen people. The difference between the haves and have-nots is too conspicuous. People like Muthu are only too ready and waiting to oblige to whatever the rich upper class demands.

The self-delusion of Sindi that perverts all Hindu ethical codes of Maya, Karma and detachment to suit his own pensive contemplation stating, "Nothing seems real to me, leave alone permanent. Nothing seems to be very important" (113), fades away leading Sindi to an affirmation that in many ways the past had been a waste, but it had not been without lessons as the ancient scripture espouses. Even, "The dead teach you how to overcome their death" (*Foreigner* 164).

Joshi's maiden novel *The Foreigner* could be a narration of an individual person is highly autobiographical. A Japanese biochemist says that, when he smiles, it is, "*a little cheerful, a little sad, and very sexy*" (*The Foreigner* 128) which has a lot to reveal.

*The Foreigner* is narrated in a series of flashbacks, with an intense ordering of past events being obviously spiritual and autobiographical. The narrator 'I' is both experiencing the foreignness and perceiving others' foreignness and hence results sometimes in a narrative distance.

A few glimpses into The Bhagwad Gita regarding Karma would be informative. Actions done with attachment and volition causes Karma or bondage. Such people suffer the fruits of their action according to the karmic ledger, the repercussion might be unpleasant, pleasant or none of these. All of a sudden Sindi Oberoi rechristens himself as Surrender Oberoi, fixed in Yoga which is skill in action but still in mind. The selfdelusion of Sindi that perverts all ethical codes of Maya, Karma and detachment to suit his own pensive contemplation stating, "*Nothing seems real to me, leave alone permanent. Nothing seems to be very important*" (*The Foreigner* 113), fades away leading Sindi to an affirmation that in many ways the past had been a waste, but it had not been without lessons as our ancient scripture espouses. Even,

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Joshi's novels probe into the inner recesses of the character's mind. To suit the Stream of Consciousness technique, Arun Joshi uses the language of the interior, the language of the heart and mind which is a subtle mixture of emotion and intellect, of poetry and prose. Joshi echoes Indian consciousness through the Stream of Consciousness technique and not the consciousness of a Camus or of Kafka protagonist. After all what he gives is a typical Indian Stream of Consciousness revealed through the inner turmoil of the Indian characters in a typically Indian situation.

Among the Indian novelists, handling Stream of Consciousness technique, Arun Joshi occupies a significant position. Chiefly concerned with the depiction of psychological reality, he can be called a novelist of the inner world. He prefers the private to the public. In his novels, he explores the inner reality of his protagonists. Since Joshi is dealing with various levels of consciousness of his characters, he found technique used by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, William Faulkner and Dorothy Richardson quite suitable for the purpose of his character delineation. Hence, we see the use of flashbacks, and Stream of Consciousness technique in his all novels. Joshi's first novel *The Foreigner* depicts psychograph of the protagonist Sindi Oberoi and explores the individual's anguished consciousness of being alienated from the existing convention. In it, Joshi resorts to the flashback technique to limn out the inner weather of the protagonist. Sindi remains a foreigner whether he is in London, in Boston or in Delhi. He could not think about himself belonging to any country in particular and wonders, "*did I belong to the world?*" (55) He says:

*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 different 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 (55).*

The above citation is significant enough to suggest an obvious case of Steam of Consciousness. The foreignness of Sindi is not something external but something, which he feels within.

The simple style is enriched and made effective by means of dreams, sickness, wounds, pain and fear. Death in reality, or the very thought or reference to it, could be traced throughout the novel resulting in the dynamic turn of events. He avers that, *“once you are born, you spend the rest of your life getting away from your birth” (The Foreigner 124).*

Even the idea of love and hatred are blended with death and fear.

*“Love is real only when you know what you love must, one day die”*  
(The Foreigner 145).

J. Krishnamurti, a great teacher of our time, says that,

*“As long as there is fear there is no love ... only when there is no pleasure, no desire or fear, then there is something called love” (77).*

The images of wounds, scars and other physical sufferings like abortion, surgery and diseases serve to emphasize the mental agony of the protagonist. June’s separation is like “an unforeseen abortion” (Foreigner 123) and her death, is

*“as if some indefatigable surgeon was cleaning up my soul with the sharp edge of his scalpel”*  
(The Foreigner 165).

The tubercular wife of Muthu, living in a single room apartment with eleven others, leads to the desired metamorphosis of Sindi.

A series of flashbacks with mellifluous order of arrangement of past events capturing the past and the present, the imaginative world, and the factual happenings maximize the thrill of the novel. The death of Babu in a car accident, the reason that induced Babu’s suicidal rash driving being eclipsed till the reader finishes two thirds of the novel, June’s picture found in Babu’s wallet, the identification of Babu’s mortal remains at the morgue by Sindi Oberoi, letters of Babu written to his sister who well before the accident, has got an idea of Babu’s discomfort at the foreign land, all brings aloft Arun Joshi on par with a thriller writer. The weight of the serious theme of *The Foreigner* is counteracted by the detective story mode of narration. The chronology of the incidents is not lost in spite of the riddlesome sway from past and the present.

Joshi makes use of seasons and time to reflect human emotions. At times the seasons forebode certain things. The first time when Sindi meets Babu, it is an “unusually cold” September evening, which is how ultimately ~~Sindi~~ **Sindi** ends, in a freezing manner. Fortunately, in spite of frequent tragedies, he is eased of the agony very surprisingly, in due course.

The use of similes and animal imagery are also found which render a glow to what the author wants to convey. The fallen spider walking upside down exploring his inverted universe, and the beautiful imagery of the shuffling of cards are symbolic representation of man's pathetic non-grip over nature in the universe. Sindi finds June "graceful like a cat"(64) and Babu's affection for her is "dog-like"(86). When Sindi pays his first visit to Khemka's household, "A lone fly, quite unexpected in that air-conditioned room, buzzed across the room and settled on"(13) his cheek. He understands that Mr. Khemka is less humane and he should "stop being a jackal" (182) whereas the latter considered Sindi as "stubborn as a Mule" or even worse.

The 'I' character serves its purpose well, bringing out the protagonist's psychical contact with society and environment that induce a disturbed psychological development which finally enable him to solve his turmoil of alienation. The very confession of Sindi, that he is not good at remembering events pay testimony to his simplicity of character and confessional mode. As far as possible, the narration of Joshi is neutral, unprejudiced, matter of fact revealing the identities of all the characters true to their nature, rendering the story on aroma of a real happening experienced by every one of the readers in his vicinity.

The language employed by Joshi, is free flowing. Sprinkling the novel with similes, satire, metaphors, parallelism and oxymorons to indicate variation of mood and intensity of emotional outbursts, Joshi states that Sindi

*"feels like a river that hopes to leave its dead wood behind taking an unexpected plunge over a steep precipice"* (The Foreigner 176)

since he felt like

*"sitting in your own tomb"* (22). Also

*"Strangers parted on the doorstep promising to meet again knowing full well they didn't mean it. It was the American way"* (23).

When Sindi's professor says that every foreign student is an ambassador of his country, he wonders

*"what country had I represented"* (43).

Babu's memory piercing through the statues and Jukebox song to stress Existential appeal are some of the motifs mentioned in the novel. The very title gains a symbolic value in the larger context of human existence and struggle. The metaphysical anguish of the protagonist at the meaninglessness of the human condition, the unreality, insecurity and transitoriness associated with the word 'foreigner', provides the texture and structure of the novel.

No action goes unrewarded or unpunished. Sindi goes wrong when he states that Mr. Khemka and the entire civilization are behind Babu's death, but soon understands that no one can be the cause for another person's misery and thus repents. He understands that the individual is responsible for whatever befalls him. He states to Mr. Khemka thus:

*"I have sinned, and God knows, I have paid heavily for them. This time it is your name that is being called. It is you who must answer. That is the only hope of salvation you have left"* (181).

A Foreigner is the story of a young man who is detached, almost estranged, a man who sees himself as a stranger, an alien wherever he goes or lives in Kenya where he was born, in UK and USA where he was a student and in India where he finally settles down. His detachment transcends barriers of geography, nationality and culture. It propels him from one predicament to another, sucking in the wake several people, including June; an attractive American with whom he had a short lived but passionate affair. The transitoriness associated with the word 'foreigner' permeates the novel and is handled with remarkable maturity reminding the reader of epoch-making *The Outsider* by Albert Camus. The protagonist's anguish at the meaninglessness of the human condition and the eventual release from the anxieties of life through karmayoga, the principle of action without attachment, add to the aesthetics of the work.

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