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Existentialism in the Novels of Arun Joshi

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Abstract:

The present research paper examines the existential themes in two novels by Arun Joshi: *The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. The innovation of existentialist literature lies in the strength with which it depicts alienation in the modern era, the meaninglessness of life and the search for truth and absolute values. Joshi's protagonists reveal the fundamental themes of existentialist philosophy and literature. Joshi's protagonists, like those of Sartre and Camus, are conscious of the absurdity of human existence and attempt to rebel against it, though often rebellion leads them to death and obscurity. Arun Joshi's novels highlight individuality and authenticity in his characters and depict other concerns that fascinate Western existentialist writers like alienation, anxiety, despair, dread of death, freedom, responsibility and finitude. In Joshi's literary world the existentialist fate is unavoidable. However, most of his main characters do not give up and do not surrender to fate, but fight against it in body and spirit. Joshi's characters live and die lives committed to the existential principles of freedom and authenticity, realising that if they give up the struggle, all hope for a better future is lost.

Keywords: Existentialism, Arun Joshi, *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*.

Introduction:

Arun Joshi embraced existentialist thought whole-heartedly. The central tenets of both Western and Indian existentialism are a powerful undercurrent that runs through all his works. In order to discuss Arun Joshi's unique place in existentialist literature, it is imperative to briefly review the relevant elements of Western existentialism. The central proposition of Western existentialist philosophy, that man's existence precedes his essence, grew out of the crisis of values that began in the end of the nineteenth century, when Friedrich Nietzsche announced the death of God. Man found himself in an absurdist world, in a world without a deity, in which science can reveal the mechanical workings of nature but cannot discover the reason for their existence or any rational motivation for the existence of man and the universe.

The absurdity of existence evokes in man a sense of horror, disorientation, loneliness and anxiety. He experiences an existential fear—which is a fear of death—and attempts to find a way to render his existence tolerable. In the absence of God, he is forced to bear the full responsibility for his existence and shape his life and environment as best he can in order to confront his terror and the absurdity of his plight. The existential philosophers and writers invite us to contemplate our existence, experience it and discover the full scope of its implications. Man, they say, cannot escape himself and his existence, but must experience them as a dynamic process, an ongoing and unique progression of decisions and choices between various possibilities. The Danish writer and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), considered to be the spiritual and historical father of existentialism, introduced into Western thought the concept of man who stands full of fear and trembling as he faces the most basic and fateful questions of his existence. Notions of solitude, authenticity, anxiety, despair, death and the absurd are central to existential philosophy. Man, living in this world, is perceived as being limited by death and as suffering from profound isolation and existential anxiety. Existentialist philosophy and literature reached its peak after World War II, which saw the greatest horrors of the twentieth century, because this philosophy and literature address the basic question of life, death, selfhood and the realities of the modern world, and presents modern man as standing alone in the struggle to confront his fate.

Existentialist writers, especially Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, stressed the centrality of the individual in any given situation. Most existentialist works are atheist in their

approach, stressing the nothingness of man and perceiving death and the meaninglessness of life as an inescapable reality. Existentialist literature is thus essentially pessimistic: life is regarded as meaningless and purposeless, and man is seen as a stranger in this world, standing alone and desperate in the face of the horror and anxiety of a life stripped of all illusion. Yet, at the same time, existentialism celebrates man's freedom to shape his life according to his own will. According to Sartre and Camus, since man is free, he has freedom to choose his own path and is fully responsible for his actions, despite the irrationality of the world. Having witnessed the horrific massacres of the first half of the twentieth century, which deepened the sense of absurdity, horror and despair, they sought to find a cure for man's plight and an answer to the most profound and difficult question: how to deal with the absurdity of existence. They contended that man has three options: to commit suicide; to deceive himself; or to recognize the absurdity, rebel against it and strive for authenticity. Camus favors the third option, arguing that man must live the absurd. That is, he must acknowledge the absurdity of existence and endure the fate best defined by Sartre when he said, Man is doomed to be free. Man is required to rebel against the absurd and strive for the full realization of his essence. One who does so is an authentic being whose existential morality defines his freedom as long as it does not infringe upon the freedom of others.

After the 1950s, Indian English fiction, like its Western counterpart, shifted its emphasis from the public to the private sphere. Now, the novelist's interest is directed towards delineating the individual's quest for the self in all its varied forms. A typical protagonist of modern fiction is a split-personality locked up into Hamletian dilemma. He is a tortured soul who always finds himself in a tragic mess. Much of modern fiction is either an existentialist fable or psychic drama. The protagonist of Dostoevsky is possessed. Camus's is an outsider. Kafka's is under the trial, Ellison's is an invisible man, Samuel Beckett's is absurd, and Saul Bellow's is displaced. All of them are exploring the experience of alienation in one way or the other.

Self-alienation has worse effects on an individual than social alienation. It is the more basic form of rootlessness. It is this inner crisis of the modern man that has occupied Arun Joshi's primary interest in his novels that are built around the dark and dismal experiences of the soul. He frankly acknowledged the influence of Albert Camus, Sartre, Kierkegaard and other western and eastern existentialist writers on his works. The present research paper focuses on

Arun Joshi's novels which reflect the absurdity of man's existence in the modern world. However, his application of uniqueness is in the Indian context and deriving solution from the native milieu. His novels are appropriated and modulated by the ethos of Hindu existential vision. The most significant and straightforward treatment of the theme of alienation can be found in the novels of Arun Joshi. His debut novel, *The Foreigner* (1968), is a gripping existential masterpiece that focuses on the themes of isolation and identity crisis. The philosophy of attachment and non-attachment, as portrayed in the Gita, lies at the basis of the crisis inside the crisis. The attachment to labour is the fundamental source of all evil in society, according to the Bhagavad-Gita. Like a water drop on a lotus petal, it conveys the principle of non-attachment. When it is applied to Sindi in the novel *The Foreigner*, his life began with rootlessness and this haunts him till the end of his life.

The novel depicts what Spengler refers to as the crisis of the present through the story of Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist, who is a thoroughly existentialist character—rootless, restless, and luckless in a mad, bad, absurd world. He is a perennial outsider, “an uprooted young man living in the latter half of the twentieth century” (TF 207) who belongs to no country, no people and finds himself in the predicament of a foreigner wherever he goes—Kenya, Uganda, England, America and India. His rootlessness “is not merely one of geography or nationality, it is rooted within his soul like an ancient curse and drives him from crisis to crisis” (TF 8). He is one who does not have roots anywhere in the world as he himself admits, “I have no roots” (TF 143). He muses over his foreignness:

I wondered in what way, if any, did I belong to the world that roared beneath my apartment window. Somebody had begotten me without a purpose and so far I had lived without a purpose, unless you would 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. (TF 65)

Sindi feels like an outsider everywhere and does not belong anywhere, and his words and actions give the same impression to everyone he meets. June remarks very early in her

acquaintance with Sindi, “I have a feeling you'd be a foreigner anywhere” (TF 35). Sheila tells him when he comes to India afterwards, “you are still a foreigner, you don't belong here” (TF 149). Sindi is a child of mixed parentage. He is born in Kenya of a Kenyan-Indian father and an English mother. He is orphaned at the age of four when his parents die in an air crash near Cairo. He is brought up by his uncle in Kenya who, too, dies soon. He had felt some kind of security when his uncle was alive but the death of his uncle wastes away every sense of sustenance to his being. He comes to the conclusion that he is a man of the family less, country less and nothingness. He did not suffer poverty and other financial crisis but his crisis is internal that forced him to the meaninglessness of his existence. As R.S. Pathak states “his existential drifting over the surface of the earth and his experimentation with self only intensify his dismal loneliness and an acute sense of meaninglessness of life” (44).

Sindi is totally broken and anchorless. In his childhood, he was denied of parental love and affection. He fails to have any idea of his parents and the warmth received from them. He betrays Camus's Meursault-like indifference towards his parents. When Mr Khemka wants to know how they died, he replies with a sting of irony, “For the hundredth time I related the story of those strangers whose only reality was a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs” (TF12). He finds himself incapable of receiving any emotional involvement with the milieu of his racial origin. He is an alien everywhere physically as well as metaphorically. He is a born foreigner, a man alienated from all humanity. He confesses “My foreignness lay within me” (TF 65). He grows up without family ties and without a country. To Mr. Khemka and his daughter he tells clearly, “I hated to talk about my parents, I hated the pity I got from the people” (TF 11). H.M. Prasad comments “Denied of love, familial nourishment, and cultural roots, he grows with a built-in fissure in his personality and becomes a wandering alien, rootless like Naipaul's unanchored souls or Camus' Outsider” (TF 29).

Sindi holds the belief that everyone should be away from all the attachments in life. This detachment is not only with individuals but also with all the objects of life. His meeting with June gives a complete turn in life. June deeply loves Sindi. During their love, she puts all her efforts to marry him. But Sindi's idea of detachment keeps away from June. He goes on talking and behaving disinterestedly with June and June's sincere efforts to involve Sindi in a loving union fail due to his ego which forces him to practise detachment. Though Sindi continues his

passionate affair with June for quite a long time, he tries not to get attached to her for, “One should be able to love without wanting to possess.... One should be able to detach oneself from the object of one’s love” (TF 60). June has repeatedly requested him to get married to her, “Let’s get married, Sindi. For God’s sake, let’s get married” (TF 107). In this way Sindi stubbornly refuses to succumb to June’s love and to loosen his grip on his creed of detachment and non-involvement. He believes that man is just a toy in the hands of time having nothing to do but wait till time decides the future.

The individual’s ability for decision and self-acknowledgment is sharply drawn in Joshi’s *The Foreigner*. Although Sindi Oberoi, the hero cultivates an act of indifference around him, he is a person who yearns to cherish and to be adored. In his disengaged perspective on life, Sindi is much the same as Mersault of Camus’s *The Outsider*, Sindi has no respect for society, no belief in God or faith. His estrangement from his companions and the individuals around him generates in him the anxiety of the meaninglessness of life. Like Sartre’s hero, Roquentin, Sindi too encounters an anxious sentiment of sickness which keeps him restless throughout his life, Sindi, an anomaly on the planet, sees his method of living like a little death. Sindi’s awareness of the meaninglessness of human life in the world accounts for his inauthentic mode of existence. Inauthentic existence is essentially a life of pleasure-seeking and it gradually brings forth despair, boredom, and unhappiness. In such a state, man ignores his potentiality of being and what pertains is a sense of vacuity, worthlessness, and nothingness. In his keenness to steer a substantive existence, Sindi lives in an exceedingly unusual universe of intense delight and similarly serious agony.

Sindi’s sufferings are manifestations of a spiritual crisis which all sensitive and introvert people have to face in life. He wants peace, a capacity to love and the courage to live without desire and attachment. Like a man faced with existential anguish, he thinks that “Death wipes out everything, for most of us anyway. All that is left is a big mocking zero” (TF 92). To him, “Good things and bad things appear to be the same in the long run of existence” (TF 93). Thus, a realisation of the absurdity of human situation can be seen in his self and his refusal to marry June only heightens it. The death of June and Babu makes Sindi restless, further rootless and lonely, drifting into the meaningless uncertainties about life and existence and the abominable absurdity of the world. June’s death acts as a tragic peripeteia and it brings to Sindi the sudden

realization that “detachment at that time had meant inaction. Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachments consisted of the right action and not escape from it, “The gods had set a heavy price to teach me just that” (TF 162). Sindi’s effort to forget his affinity with June and Boston land him in India. It grapples him with a new sort of social alienation caused by Mr. Khemka’s materialistic society as well as self-alienation after working with the poor laborers of his firm. He is deeply touched by the poverty of the laborers. Their forbearance to bear their responsibilities amidst hunger without any shirking from responsibilities teaches him the lesson of involvement as Muthu speaks, “Sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved” (TF 188). It brings a major change in Sindi’s attitude towards life and he plunges into the battle of survival which the laborers could not have won without his help, cooperation, and guidance. Deeply aware of this change in himself, Sindi gives a new orientation to his name as he calls himself ‘Surrender Oberoi’ which signifies his affirmation in involvement.

Sindi finds relief from his anguish when he comes to India and is satisfied with his involvement in right action. India makes him shift the attachment from the self to the world. The journey from the West to East symbolises Sindi’s spiritual quest. Sindi’s long and circuitous journey helps him recognise the meaning and purpose of life. Muthu for him becomes the most appropriate example of the ideal man--the man of sound wisdom. When he comes to India, he immediately joined in Khema Industries which makes him to endure continuous emotions and experiences. One can find a kind of transformation in the life of Sindi. The main person behind this transformation is Muthu.

In 1971 Arun Joshi’s second novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* was published. Immediately after its publication it established itself as an influential masterpiece in Indian English Literature. This novel is a depiction of the conflict between the primitive and the civilized world. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* seems to be a sequel to his other novels in which his protagonist, Billy Biswas, is lonely and misfit in that world where he has to live and face the meaninglessness of life. He is restlessly searching for his roots and trying to know the purpose of his existence. His alienation from the civilized world leads him to explore the dark mossy labyrinths of his soul that longs for individuality. The motif of quest permeates the whole narrative as the novelist himself has admitted in his interview, “My novels are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of myself” (Bannerjee 3).

The story is told from the witness-narrator's point of view. The narrator, Romesh Sahai (Romi), is a friend of the protagonist Billy whom he has met as a student in New York. Romi performs the functions of an involved friend and a detached narrator. As the story progresses Romi and Billy get more and more involved and both bring the tale to an end. Despite being a concerned friend in Billy's life, Romi finds Billy's character to be an enigma. He disclaims in the beginning of the narrative that he has understood Billy:

As I grow old, I realize that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood. The attempt to understand is probably even more futile. If in spite of this I propose to relate Billy's story, it is not so much because I claim to have understood him as it is on account of a deep and unrelieved sense of wonder that in the middle of the twentieth century, in the heart of Delhi's smart society, there should have lived a man of such extraordinary obsessions. (TSCBB 3)

What the existentialist admires is not the happiness of a man's life, the goodness of his disposition, or the rigidity of his acts, but the authenticity of his existence. The concept of authenticity is rooted in the existential interpretation of freedom. We live from birth to death under the compulsions of brutal facts; yet out of the mere givenness of situations, we shape ourselves and our world, and either we succeed in it or fail. Though Billy could very well afford to live in some other posh areas like Manhattan; as he comes from an "upper crust of Indian society" (TSCBB 5), he has chosen to live there because, as he tells Romi, he finds it "the most human place" (TSCBB 5). Romi underlines his modesty still further, "I had neither the imagination nor the obsessive predilection of Billy Biswas" (TSCBB 150). This confession reminds one of Conrad's narrator in *Under Western Eyes* who begins by disclaiming "the possession of those high gifts of imagination and expression which would have enabled my pen to create for the reader the personality of the man who called himself Razumov" (Conrad 3). Such statements highlight the detached tone of the novel.

Billy feels alienated in civilized society, irritated by the hypocritical attitudes of the people around, and is haunted by the questions, "Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?" (TSCBB 122). An evidence of his indifference to the so-called civilized world can be traced in his active preparation for his Ph.D. in Anthropology, while his father does not

know about it and thinks that he is doing engineering in America. He likes to learn and “find out about the aboriginalness of the world” (TSCBB 14). Romi rightly sums up his impression of Billy, “It was around his interest in the primitive man that his entire life had been organized” (TSCBB 14). Billy’s predicament becomes a strange case as he turns out to be a split personality-split between primitive and civilized. His strange case becomes “a universal myth of the primitive in the heart of man ever alienating him from the superficial and polished banalities of modern civilization” (Mathur and Rai 35).

Authentic existence, according to Sartre, is defined by a distinctive attitude towards freedom in regard to value; for Heidegger it is the orientation to the end of life, to resolve the death that is fundamental to authenticity. In both cases, authenticity is a form of honesty or courage; the authentic individual confronts something that the inauthentic one is scared to confront. Arun Joshi has portrayed Billy as an authentic person. He is a young professor of Anthropology in Delhi University with full of enthusiasm and calibre but he finds his job boring and meaningless. He has been spending his days hopelessly doing nothing. Generally, a man of this age struggles to achieve more and more success in his life, always tries to accomplish his ambitions, and accumulates more wealth for his betterment in life. But Billy is an exception to it; he has no such ambitions, aims or plans for his future life. If a person has sensed the meaninglessness and futility of life, he gives a strange perspective to his worldly actions. He may be wealthy and civilized enough to meet his daily needs, but he may dislike leading a way of life, that others may prefer to live. He would rather throw away this burden of behaving, unlike others, as a member of society, and he would remain loyal to his own feelings and sentiments. He hates the pretentious behaviour of society.

Billy decides to get married in order to get over his aberrations. He briefly imagines that being married would offer him a new foundation to lean on and provide him with a sense of purpose in life. But his marriage with Meena turns out to be a failure because he finds Meena to be a prototype of materialistic men. Meena craves for money, but she never tries to establish a rapport with him. Such domestic life increases Billy’s alienation and he loses his temper at minor issues quarreling “all the time”, “snapping at everybody”, remaining in a “dark mood” (TSCBB 70), not touching his wife for six months. Meena is totally opposite to Billy’s nature. From

existential point of view she is an inauthentic character in the novel. Each and every activity of Meena is dominated by the social code and conduct.

Billy wants to live in a society that could grant him internal peace and happiness. Unable to find it in the flossy, indifferent and morally degraded society of Delhi, he sneakily leaves Delhi for the Satpura Hills. “Naturally, Billy left this world of the so-called civilized men in search of a place where he was not treated as an outcast, not culturally uprooted, socially isolated and self-estranged” (Sharma 164). Here, the shift from one level of life to another made by the protagonist is also the shift from one paradigm of value-system to another. The very epigraph of the novel, taken from Arnold’s *Thyrsis*, “It irk’d him to be here, he could not rest”, makes the thematic direction of the novel clear. Like Arnold’s Scholar Gipsy, Billy too flees from the so-called civilized society and seeks shelter in the idyllic Maikala hills. Billy joins the tribes as the ultimate attempt to live a meaningful life and rejects the hollowness of Delhi where he feels “pinned down... like a dead butterfly” (TSCBB 47). He prefers to live with Dhunia, Bilasia and others because he finds an altogether different atmosphere there, “Nobody here is interested in the prices of food grains or new seeds or roads or elections and stuff like that” (TSCBB 111). While living among simple people one can look through their hearts. No ambition corrupts them. When nearly three years Romi meets Billy, and he finds Billy finished, “snuffed out like candle left in the rain”, (TSCBB 66) Billy’s rejection highlights the meaninglessness of our prosperity which alienates individuals from his own self and society. Thus, Billy is a true existentialist hero, who behaves authentically in the society. Power, prestige, money, social status, etc. are the meaningless and hopeless concepts for him. He rebels against the social morals, rules, customs, and traditions of the society and lives life according to his own perspective.

Conclusion:

Existentialism was an important innovation in fiction not because it introduced new literary forms or structures, but because it addressed the most fundamental questions of human existence. The modern protagonist, unlike the solid and virtuous heroes of the nineteenth century, has neither duties nor rights, neither loyalties nor responsibility. He questions and doubts everything. According to the existentialist point of view, man attempts to give meaning to reality when it is nothing but a collection of deceptions and illusions with nothing behind them.

At the same time, man remains responsible for his own life and for his thoughts and anxieties, which confirm his existence. The novelty of existentialist literature lies in the power with which it describes man's alienated state, his insignificance, and his futile search for absolute values and truth. The issues Arun Joshi addresses make his readers think about their personal decision between the materialistic values and spiritual affirmation. His novels suggest that man's metaphysical reconciliation is the only answer to all the agonies of his existence. They demonstrate that modern man may overcome his sense of uprootedness by self searching and introspection. Their instinctive yearning for affirmation and authenticity is a native cultural thrust which most defines Indian metaphysical concerns. The protagonist reaches a critical point where he is in utter confusion, and then encounters a catastrophe which becomes the basis for his introspection and prompts him ultimately to reconcile to the world. Arun Joshi's characters may attest to the absurdity of reality and suffer alienation, rootlessness, depression and distress, yet they ponder the meaning of life and conclude that life cannot be meaningless.

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