

An Existentialist Study of Arun Joshi Novels

Nishant Kumar, Shri Guru Gobind Singh College, Chandigarh

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Abstract

Arun Joshi's enigma of human existence consolidates in his five novels, where he moves around multiple social and individual life phenomena. His novels and short stories manifest the modern predicament of life. The protagonists of his novels confront the existential vision of life, and their mindset reports the problem of loneliness, isolation, the enigma of life, anxiety, dilemma, hallucination, dread, freedom and responsibility, the voice of soul, and self-realization. His protagonists are unhappy and unsatisfied not with any social norms and the phenomenon of society but with themselves, the voice of their soul, and their conscience that they often fail to console. This research paper aims to discover the existentialist facts in Arun Joshi's Novels.

Keywords: loneliness, isolation, the enigma of life, anxiety, dilemma, hallucination, dread, freedom, and responsibility.

Introduction

Arun Joshi, through his characters, attempts to manifest that only social and cultural norms suppress and kill man's natural desire to recognize himself, as both the Eastern and Western philosophers believe. He depicts the belief and mystery of Indian philosophy in all his novels. Delineating the traumatic experience of modern men, Joshi often tries to illustrate the various conflicts at different levels, such as the conflict between science and religion, belief and disbelief, object and subject, social and nature, materialism and predicament, and so on.

His novels are indeed an endeavor of self-expression and self-understanding of human beings. The art and vision of Arun Joshi sustain the philosophy of life. His exploration of existential philosophy in his novels is an interpretation of both Eastern and Western philosophies. He follows the tradition of Sartre, Camus, Kafka, Dostoevsky, and other Western tenets. Still, he does not leave his root in Indian aspirations fusing them with the philosophy of Buddha, Bhagavad-Gita, Mahatma Gandhi, and Vedas. He raises modern men's living and rampant problems in his novels, predominantly upper middle class. He delineates them from the Indian body with the Eastern and the Western thoughts.

The protagonists of his novels live in the hatred of the civilized world following its materialistic and hollow vision. They are, in fact, Westernised Indians who always try to come out from the existential despair of meaningless life. In a real sense, Joshi may raise the issue of man's identity out of the mass or crowds. He correlates it with the spiritual and mystic approach of the Gita and Buddha's philosophy that leads them toward the spirituality of life. Having noticed the trivial look of society, such as ignorance and self-delusion, the contradictory pulls of reason and impulse, questions on faith, rootlessness, and meaninglessness approach have killed their individual's natural feelings from its deep-rooted soul where modern men find themselves living on the dead land.

Joshi's novels are the projection of human predicament in which he deals with man's identity searching for the absurdity of life. He reveals in his novels some of the Western advocacy on the revolutionary or extreme situations such as the 'Leap of faith', 'Absurd belief in God' of Kierkegaard; 'Boundary situation' of Jasper; 'Will to power', 'Death of God' of Nietzsche; Camus's and Kafka's 'Rebellious attitude and absurdity and meaninglessness of life'; and Sartre's 'existence precedes essence', 'Freedom and responsibility', and 'Bad faith'. Almost all the protagonists confront the problem of existential agony, anxiety, and anguish. All of them are fed up with worldly and obsessive indulgence with reason. They often suffer from some unknown disease, such as Sindi suffering from the problem of belongingness and alienation. Billy suffers with a mystical voice coming out from his self or primitivism; Ratan suffers from the hollowness of the materialistic society; Som entangles himself into the labyrinth of life in searching out the mystery of life while his last novels unfold the conflict between Boatmen and Grand Master. All of them are failed to achieve the fundamental objective and meaning of life even if they look satisfied with themselves once they meet someone spiritual or meaningful.

Due to the lack of emotional, ethical, and spiritual identification, they fail to get the right way to cope with the contemporary world; consequently, their angst becomes more profound with time. His protagonists are the modern Indians whose Individual ideology reflects their personal experiences of the materialistic world. His novels manifest an ongoing discourse of existentialism through the struggle of an individual rather than the mass. Joshi speaks in an interview on man's freedom and isolation that Arvind Nawale cites: (or liberty, if you like), which is political and spiritual, I have not much dealt with. But the inner-liberation and the outer-liberation are crucial to me. So inner liberation without detachment is impossible; selfishness always stops you from getting liberated. Loneliness is when you become aware that you are not delivered and do not know how to get released. That is the loneliness stage in a man's life. Except for *The City and the River*, from the first to the fourth novels, Joshi portrays almost the whole life experience by looking at the subjective form he projects through his characters, which is the essential idea of Western existentialists.

The proper vision of his protagonists towards life reveals the ideology that Joshi felt in his time. He came to the upper middle class, was educated in America and England, and worked in India as a businessperson; therefore, the upper-middle-class protagonists of his novels, like Sindi, Billy, and Som, got their education from Western universities and settled

down in India. Joshi probably pours his experience of life in the Western and the Eastern world and how it affects the mentality of the people about cultural, psychological, and social conflicts. Thus, the image of autobiographical elements also appears in his novels.

Despite being an executive personality, Joshi appears to be an anti-rationalist, which becomes the subject matter of his novels. In his books, belief and disbelief about God, science, reason, ration, society, life, and others run throughout. The protagonists like Sindi Oberoi, Ratan Rathor, and Som Bhaskar suffer only because of their excessive belief in the rational world. Sindi fails to judge the love of June, Kathy, and Anna only due to his habit of rationalizing everything, even human emotion. He always suppresses his intuitive feeling only in search of his identity and existence in isolation. His contact with others remains meaningless which is why the fearful and painful atmosphere hovers around him, consequently, everyone meets with a tragic end, only coming in his touch. In *The Last Labyrinth*, Som Bhaskar also tries to comprehend the meaning of life and its reality based on rational aspects of scientific analysis. Sindi and Som are tormented between belief and disbelief only because they studied the scientific reasoning philosophies of Jung, Freud, and Darwin, which stop them from moving toward faith while searching for the meaning of life; Billy leaves the civilized world. Through his protagonists, Joshi interprets the existential vision of rational and irrational beliefs in life. Their existential problems remain constant until they connect themselves to the sensible approach leaving man's intuition and instinct.

Joshi's *The City and the River* also deals with the problem of belongingness in terms of the social identity of mass or Boatmen instead of individual identity. As a political parable, the novel unfolds a vivid picture of 1970s India. Joshi uses harsh satire on man's ego, ambition, desire, and passion that in fact lead man towards destruction whereby one's mistake everyone has to suffer. Apart from social depiction, the novel is very much philosophical. At the end of the book, Joshi points out the concepts of reincarnation, regeneration, re-establishment, and rebirth of the world and men of Indian philosophy. He talks about Indian legends; myths, such as after the city's destruction, a new city emerges with a new Grand Master, Bhumiputra, Astrologer, and Hermit that refers to the interest of Joshi in Indian philosophy in his novels.

The impression of Camus and Kafka also reflects in the novels of Arun Joshi. In *The Foreigner*, Sindi often thinks of committing suicide only due to being fed up with the question of his belongingness. During his education period, he directly asks his uncle to commit suicide which reveals his strange behavior and hollowness. Their positive attitude toward committing the suicide of Camus also works on Joshi's characters like Sindi and Ratan. Joshi's all the protagonists look selfish. They remain indifferent to others' feelings and emotions, whether that would be their wife, parents, friends, or others. Sindi does not care about June's feelings and loves; she loses everything for his sake of him. Similarly, Ratan does not care about Brigadier's honor and position in society; Som Bhaskar is more selfish than the other protagonists. He does not care about the future of his wife and children, only to know himself. Billy's condition also appears the same as Som's. In *The City and the River*, Grand Master's selfishness destroys the city. In fact, due to the selfish notions of Joshi's

characters, the suffering, angst, and fear revolving in each novel also affect the peaceful life of minor characters.

In *The Last Labyrinth*, Joshi shows the mystery of life in the forms of the human soul, death, and the mysterious world of spirit. The term 'Labyrinth' in the title of the novel refers to Joshi's mindset, which is an equivalent change like 'maze,' 'impasse,' 'tangle,' 'bhul-bhulaiyan', and 'entanglement' in which Som Bhaskar entangles in search of his identity and meaning of life. The perplexing question of knowing the self always haunts him, which is why he nowhere gets satisfaction. Joshi's depiction of two cities: Mumbai and Benares, has a symbolic look that Joshi manifests in the novel. His heroes are trapped or deadlocked only due to the ignorance and illusion of life; therefore, their quest to know the meaning of life and self-knowledge always remain problematic. Except for *The City and the River*, the heroes of his first four novels suffer from psychological problems, illusions, egocentricity, pride, and pain to confront reality. Their life remains pessimistic, tragic, and full of problems until they take shelter in Indian philosophy. Nietzsche's 'will power' also becomes the thematic part of Joshi's novels. The concept of 'will to power' reflects in characters like Ratan, Boatmen, Bhumi Putra, and Som. All of them believe in their free authentic willpower.

Joshi's protagonists are extraordinary from other characters and ordinary people. They are often considered strangers in their communities because of their behavior and attitude. Like an alienated and isolated atmosphere, life's pleasurable moments also fail to please them. In parties, functions, and clubs and among the family members, they look exhausted, useless, tasteless, and meaningless therefore; their thinking leads them towards emptiness and hollowness of life. The world appears to them as a dream, illusion, fancy, and nightmare, as if they are living on the metaphysical ground. His portrayal of the female figure is more robust than male. They are not submissive, or dependent on others. They look confident, courageous, active, and firm to face the reality of life, such as June, Bilasia, Anuradha, Gargi, and Head Man. Through them, the protagonists of the novels come to know the meaning of life. In all his books, Joshi talks about absurd belief and disbelief in the existence of God, philosophy, the mystery of life, and rivers and nature. Most of his characters have a wild and blind belief in God and their existence such as Ratan's mother, Anuradha's mother, tribes, and boatmen. Their absurd idea also leads them towards tragic land while Sindi, Billy, Som, Ratan, and Astrologer have no belief in God's existence. Joshi shows three ways to escape the maze of life: realization, expiation, and sacrifice. Sindi's completion, Ratan's expiation, and Boatmen's sacrifice for their identity reflect the meaning of life. Lord Krishna, Himself, says to Arjun in his hallucination that sacrifice is the way to man's redemption and salvation. Through it, man can get eternity; therefore, his protagonists have a sense of realization of life. Thus, Arun Joshi's novels are an apparent fusion of Eastern and Western culture, tradition, philosophy, and spiritual vision of life. In search of the meaning of life, individual existence, and identity, his characters move from place to place, person to person. Joshi employs both Eastern and Western philosophy in terms of subjectivity, suffering, sacrifice, identity, anxiety, dread, suicide, freedom, belief, disbelief, selfishness, primitivism, pragmatism, courage, power, and a sense of realization. All the protagonists search for their existence and

the voice of their soul in realizing the self. Joshi accepts in an interview that his purpose in writing a novel is the essential attempt to lead a better understanding of life. His depiction of nature in his novels generates the interest in men to again come in touch with nature whom they have forgotten in hoarding and race of life. Apart from existential despair, the glorification of primitivism, futility, and hollowness of civilized materialistic society and human values are also the major themes of his novels that Joshi deals them at a deeper level. Therefore, Joshi's novels manifest various levels of life in terms of looking into man's inner voice rather than ideas. The *Foreigner* refers to lord Krishna's message of action (Karma); *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* delivers the message of primitive look for everyone; *The Apprentice* refers to Ratan's sin and expiation; *The Last Labyrinth* indicates the mystery of life to follow religious garb while his last novel, *The City and the River* projects a satire on man's inhuman state. Joshi says that desire, over-ambition, and pride, lead men toward destruction. Thus, the thesis explores Joshi's new vision of life regarding the Individual aspirations of men and their understanding. To live a better life, one needs to come out of the mess of the materialistic world that he expresses through his personal life experience with his novels' protagonists. In an interview, Arun Joshi delivered a message as follows:

There are two things that I have consciously tried to convey. Individual actions have effects on others and oneself. So one cannot afford to continue with irresponsible existence but has to commit oneself at some point. From that angle, Hinduism is a hugely existentialist-oriented philosophy since it attaches importance to the right way to live (to exist). Secondly, it is very difficult to steer one's way through life, right or wrong. (Jain 97-98).

Conclusion

Joshi had a strong faith in Indian philosophy, religion, and spirituality, reflected at the end of each novel. The earlier life of all his protagonists begins in the Western scenario, especially in the world of materialism, capitalism, scientific inventions, rationalism, and a puzzled atmosphere; in such conditions, they remain far away from spiritualism, mysticism, and religion. Joshi also questions himself in believing in God that reveals his study of foreign land which become a sort of subject matter of his novels, therefore in his talk at Dhvanyaloka, he says, that T.K. Ghosh cites in his book: For some years, I have been wondering how I can know God. I have had the feeling that God, the Divine Ground, takes its home in different degrees in different people, and it is spirituality, the more advanced, who serve as the agents, knowingly or unknowingly, of God and bring Him to other people. This is what I believe right now. There is also the question of whether God can be known through reason or only intuitively. There is also the fear that while pursuing God might be thrown back to the archaic. All these strands have crept into the novel in one form or another.

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