



EXISTENTIALISM AND ALIENATION IN ARUN JOSHI'S HEROES

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Abstract

Arun Joshi, one of India's most profound novelists, explores themes of existentialism and alienation through his deeply introspective protagonists. His novels, including *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, and *The Apprentice*, depict characters struggling with identity, moral dilemmas, and the meaning of existence in a rapidly evolving world. Drawing from existentialist philosophy, particularly the works of Sartre, Camus, and Kierkegaard, Joshi crafts narratives where his heroes grapple with loneliness, rootlessness, and self-imposed exile. This paper examines how Joshi's protagonists embody existential angst, reflecting both personal and societal conflicts in modern India. The study highlights the existential dilemmas faced by Sindi Oberoi, Som Bhaskar, and Ratan Rathor, showcasing their search for meaning amid moral ambiguity and emotional detachment. By analyzing Joshi's vision, this paper argues that his works offer a profound critique of the alienation and psychological disillusionment prevalent in contemporary society.

Keywords

Arun Joshi, existentialism, alienation, identity crisis, moral dilemmas, modern Indian literature, Sindi Oberoi, Som Bhaskar, Ratan Rathor, psychological conflict, loneliness, self-exile, existential angst, contemporary Indian fiction.

Introduction

Arun Joshi is regarded as one of India's most introspective and philosophical novelists, known for his deep exploration of human psychology, existential dilemmas, and alienation. His works stand apart in Indian English literature due to their focus on the internal conflicts of his protagonists rather than external social or political issues. Joshi's novels, including *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), and *The Apprentice* (1974), present characters who grapple with questions of identity, belonging, and the meaning of existence. His protagonists are often caught between traditional values and modern existential struggles, leading them to experience alienation, disillusionment, and moral dilemmas. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who were concerned with the socio-political fabric of post-colonial India, Joshi delved into the individual's psychological state, making his works deeply personal and universally relevant. His storytelling is influenced by Western existentialist thought, while also being rooted in the philosophical traditions of India, making his narratives uniquely compelling.

Existentialism, as a literary and philosophical movement, focuses on the individual's search for meaning in an indifferent or absurd universe. The philosophy, popularized by thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard, revolves around themes of freedom, choice, alienation, and the burden of responsibility. Alienation, in particular, is a central theme in existentialist literature, depicting individuals who feel disconnected from society, relationships, or even their own emotions. In existentialist works, characters often experience a profound sense of isolation, struggling to define themselves against the absurdity of existence. This feeling of detachment, both physical and emotional, leads to inner turmoil and existential crises. Many of Joshi's protagonists embody this existential struggle, as they find themselves lost in a world that offers no clear meaning or direction. Their alienation is not only from society but also from themselves, leading them to make choices that further deepen their existential dilemmas.

In Arun Joshi's fiction, existentialism manifests through the psychological conflicts of his protagonists. Whether it is Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner*, who wrestles with his lack of emotional attachment and inability to find belonging, or Som Bhaskar in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, who rejects modern civilization in favor of a primitive existence, Joshi's heroes are constantly questioning the meaning of their lives. Similarly, in *The Apprentice*, Ratan Rathor's moral corruption and subsequent regret highlight the existential burden of responsibility and guilt. These characters do not fit into the conventional mold of Indian literary protagonists who find solace in tradition or community; rather, they embody the loneliness of modern existence. Through their journeys, Joshi portrays the alienation of individuals who struggle to reconcile their personal beliefs with societal expectations. This paper aims to analyze how Joshi's protagonists embody existentialist angst and alienation, reflecting broader philosophical and psychological conflicts that remain relevant in contemporary literature.

Understanding Existentialism and Alienation in Literature

Existentialist philosophy, which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, explores the individual's



confrontation with a seemingly meaningless world. Søren Kierkegaard, often considered the father of existentialism, introduced the idea that individuals must create their own meaning in life rather than relying on religious or societal structures. He argued that the anxiety and despair individuals experience stem from their awareness of their own freedom and responsibility. This idea was further developed by Jean-Paul Sartre, who introduced the concept of bad faith—the tendency of individuals to deceive themselves into believing in externally imposed values rather than embracing their own freedom. Sartre's existentialism asserts that individuals are condemned to be free, meaning they must define their own essence through their actions. Albert Camus, another major existentialist thinker, introduced the idea of the absurd—the conflict between human beings' search for meaning and the indifferent universe. Camus argued that individuals must either accept the absurdity of life or seek solace in illusion. His novel *The Stranger* (1942) exemplifies this theme through the protagonist Meursault, who remains indifferent to societal norms and ultimately accepts the absurd nature of existence.

Alienation, a key theme in existentialist literature, manifests in different forms—social, psychological, and emotional. Social alienation occurs when individuals feel estranged from their community or cultural identity. Psychological alienation involves a disconnection from one's own emotions or sense of self, often leading to existential crises. Emotional alienation is seen in characters who are unable to form deep or meaningful relationships, leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Many modernist and postmodernist works reflect these ideas, presenting protagonists who struggle to find purpose in an indifferent world. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) is a powerful representation of alienation, as its protagonist Gregor Samsa undergoes a physical transformation that mirrors his deep psychological and emotional estrangement from his family and society. Similarly, in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), the unnamed narrator's rejection of society and deep introspection reflect the existentialist conflict between individual freedom and societal constraints.

Arun Joshi's fiction is deeply influenced by these existentialist ideas but is also rooted in the realities of post-independence India. Unlike Western existentialists, whose protagonists often struggle in a highly individualistic society, Joshi's characters face existential dilemmas in a world where tradition and modernity collide. His protagonists do not merely reject societal norms; they struggle to reconcile their personal desires with the expectations imposed upon them. This internal conflict drives them into deeper alienation, as they find themselves caught between conflicting identities. Joshi's narrative style, which often employs introspective monologues and fragmented storytelling, reflects the psychological depth of his characters. His works do not provide clear resolutions; rather, they depict the ongoing struggle of individuals attempting to navigate the uncertainties of existence. Through his exploration of existentialism and alienation, Joshi adds a unique voice to Indian English literature, offering a philosophical and psychological perspective that continues to resonate with readers.

Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner*: A Lost Soul in Search of Meaning

Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* (1968) presents **Sindi Oberoi**, a character who embodies the existential themes of alienation, rootlessness, and the search for meaning. Sindi is a man caught between different cultures, unable to fully belong to any, which results in an identity crisis that haunts him throughout the novel. Born to an Indian father and an English mother, he is orphaned at a young age and spends his childhood moving between England, Africa, and the United States. This nomadic existence leaves him without a firm sense of cultural or national belonging, making him a perpetual outsider. Unlike many protagonists in Indian literature who find solace in their heritage, Sindi remains detached from traditional values, questioning the very idea of roots and identity. He believes that being a "foreigner" everywhere grants him freedom from emotional entanglements and societal obligations, yet this detachment only deepens his existential crisis. His condition mirrors the classic existentialist dilemma—he is free to define his own meaning, yet he is paralyzed by the very absence of predetermined purpose.

Sindi's existential struggle is further complicated by his emotional detachment and moral ambiguity. He consciously avoids deep emotional connections, believing that attachment leads to suffering. His philosophy is influenced by a mix of Western existentialism and Eastern spiritual teachings, particularly Buddhist ideas on detachment. However, his detachment is not a source of enlightenment but rather a form of escapism. In his relationships, particularly with June Blyth, an American woman who genuinely loves him, Sindi remains distant, refusing to commit fully. His fear of emotional vulnerability reflects the existentialist theme of avoiding engagement to escape suffering, much like Meursault in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*. However, while Camus's protagonist embraces the absurdity of life with indifference, Sindi experiences guilt and inner turmoil, suggesting that he is not entirely at peace with his chosen philosophy. His emotional disengagement creates a void in his life, making him question whether his self-imposed isolation is truly liberating or simply a way to shield himself from pain.

Despite his efforts to remain unattached, Sindi is forced to confront the consequences of his detachment when June dies in a tragic accident. Her death becomes a turning point in his existential journey, shattering his illusion of control



and self-sufficiency. For the first time, he is overwhelmed by guilt, realizing that his avoidance of emotional responsibility has caused irreversible pain. He begins to question whether his philosophy of non-attachment has been a defense mechanism rather than a genuine belief. This realization aligns with existentialist notions of self-deception, where individuals construct false narratives to avoid confronting uncomfortable truths. Sartre's concept of *bad faith*—where a person deceives themselves into believing they have no responsibility for their choices—resonates strongly in Sindi's case. He has spent his life convincing himself that detachment is the key to happiness, yet he ultimately finds himself burdened by loneliness and regret. His journey illustrates the existential paradox: while freedom from societal constraints offers the possibility of self-definition, it also comes with the weight of personal responsibility and the risk of existential despair.

Sindi's alienation is not only a result of his external circumstances but also a product of his own choices. His mixed heritage and cosmopolitan upbringing prevent him from identifying fully with any single culture, making him an outsider wherever he goes. However, unlike other immigrants or expatriates who seek to integrate into their adopted environments, Sindi deliberately maintains his distance, believing that emotional and cultural detachment will protect him from suffering. This self-imposed alienation, however, only exacerbates his existential crisis. Instead of finding liberation, he finds himself drifting aimlessly, unable to form meaningful relationships or establish a true sense of self. His struggle reflects the broader existentialist theme that human beings crave both freedom and connection, yet often find these desires in conflict. The more Sindi tries to free himself from attachment, the more he realizes that isolation brings no real satisfaction, only emptiness. His story serves as a critique of extreme individualism and passive disengagement, illustrating that true existential fulfillment comes not from avoidance but from embracing life's complexities.

In the end, Sindi's journey remains unresolved, emphasizing the existentialist idea that life does not offer simple answers or clear resolutions. Unlike traditional heroes who undergo transformation and redemption, Sindi remains in a state of perpetual questioning. His realization of his emotional and moral failures does not lead to a dramatic change but rather to a deeper understanding of the contradictions within himself. This open-ended conclusion reinforces Joshi's existential vision—life is an ongoing process of searching, questioning, and redefining one's purpose. Sindi's character serves as a powerful representation of the modern existential condition, where individuals, despite their outward freedom, struggle with inner conflicts that prevent them from attaining true peace. His alienation, both self-imposed and circumstantial, highlights the universal human struggle of finding meaning in a world that offers none. Through *The Foreigner*, Arun Joshi presents not just a narrative of one man's existential journey but a broader philosophical reflection on the nature of identity, belonging, and the eternal search for meaning.

Som Bhaskar in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*: The Clash Between Civilization and Primitivism

Arun Joshi's novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) presents a powerful existential dilemma through the character of **Som Bhaskar**, the narrator, who serves as both an observer and a participant in the extraordinary life of Billy Biswas. Som Bhaskar, a bureaucrat in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), initially appears as a conventional figure—well-educated, respectable, and committed to his career. However, as the novel progresses, his interactions with Billy Biswas expose his own existential disillusionment with the rigid structures of modern society. Som represents the modern Indian elite—privileged, urban, and deeply entrenched in the expectations of a materialistic world. Yet, through Billy's radical choices, Som becomes increasingly aware of the emptiness that lurks beneath the surface of his so-called successful life. He is caught between his conventional obligations and a growing realization that the modern world, with its structured order, social norms, and bureaucratic expectations, lacks the depth and authenticity that Billy seeks in his alternative existence. Som's journey is not just an external one; it is an internal struggle between the comforts of civilization and the raw, untamed allure of a life unburdened by societal expectations.

Billy Biswas, an anthropologist turned outcast, serves as a mirror to Som's internal conflicts. While Billy actively rejects the materialistic world by disappearing into a tribal existence in Central India, Som remains on the periphery, observing but never fully participating in this rebellion. However, as he delves deeper into Billy's story, he begins to question the values that modern civilization upholds. Billy's rejection of his affluent background, his education in the United States, and his promising future in Indian society all seem unfathomable to Som at first. Yet, as he uncovers the depth of Billy's existential crisis, he starts to understand that Billy's escape into tribal life is not madness or escapism but a profound search for authenticity and meaning. Som's own existential crisis surfaces when he realizes that despite following all the prescribed paths of success—education, career, and social status—he feels unfulfilled. The growing realization that civilization, with all its order and progress, often suppresses the primal instincts and deeper truths of human existence leaves Som in a state of existential discomfort.

Billy's retreat into tribal life represents an extreme existential choice—rejecting the artificial constructs of



civilization in favor of a life governed by nature and instinct. His decision to live among the tribal people is not just an act of rebellion but an assertion of individual freedom in its purest form. For Billy, modern society is a prison that imposes meaningless obligations, while the tribal world offers liberation from pretensions, artificiality, and existential void. Som, however, remains bound by his duty as a government official, unable to make such a radical departure. He admires Billy's courage but also fears the implications of such an extreme rejection of societal norms. While Billy finds peace in the simplicity of tribal life, Som continues to struggle with the contradiction between what he has been conditioned to believe—success, duty, order—and what he now senses as a deeper truth—freedom, authenticity, and the raw essence of existence. Through Som's observations, Joshi presents a stark contrast between two opposing worldviews: one driven by societal expectations and the other by a primal, existential quest for meaning.

The central conflict in Som Bhaskar's journey is the struggle between duty and individual freedom. As an officer of the state, he is bound by responsibilities and moral codes that prevent him from fully embracing the existential choices Billy makes. His sense of duty to the government, to order, and to civilization is constantly at odds with the allure of Billy's radical rejection of these very structures. Throughout the novel, Som vacillates between understanding Billy's perspective and reaffirming his own commitment to the world he inhabits. He is drawn to Billy's freedom, yet he cannot bring himself to abandon his role in the structured world. His ultimate inability to break free highlights the existentialist dilemma—most individuals, despite recognizing the absurdity and constraints of society, lack the courage to step outside of it. Som's narrative serves as a lens through which readers experience this dilemma; he is both a participant in and a witness to Billy's rebellion, making his struggle deeply personal and universal at the same time.

In the end, Som remains within the confines of civilization, unable to follow Billy's path but forever altered by his encounter with him. His existential conflict remains unresolved, much like Joshi's broader vision of human existence—caught between the constraints of duty and the longing for true freedom. Through Som Bhaskar, Joshi explores the paradox of modern existence, where individuals recognize the limitations of their structured lives but lack the resolve to transcend them. The novel, through Som's perspective, presents civilization as both a necessity and a trap, offering security while simultaneously suppressing the raw, instinctual aspects of human nature. His story reflects the tension between societal obligations and personal authenticity, leaving readers with an unsettling yet profound contemplation on the nature of existence and the cost of true freedom.

Ratan Rathor in *The Apprentice*: Moral Corruption and Existential Regret

Arun Joshi's novel *The Apprentice* (1974) presents **Ratan Rathor**, a protagonist who undergoes a deeply existential transformation from an idealistic young man to a morally compromised bureaucrat, ultimately grappling with guilt, alienation, and the need for atonement. Ratan's journey is emblematic of the post-independence Indian experience, where personal ambitions and societal pressures often lead to ethical compromises. Initially, he is a young man filled with dreams, influenced by the ideals of patriotism and integrity instilled in him during his early years. However, as he enters the bureaucratic system, he slowly succumbs to the corrupt practices that define the very structure he once wished to change. His transition is not immediate but rather a gradual erosion of values, reflecting the existentialist notion that human beings, when faced with systemic pressures, often surrender their agency and justify their actions under the pretext of survival. His story becomes a cautionary tale of how ideals, when confronted with reality, can be diluted to the point of irrelevance, leading to profound moral and existential crises.

As Ratan rises within the bureaucratic ranks, he becomes increasingly alienated from his own values and sense of self. This alienation is not just societal but deeply psychological—he is trapped within a system that demands compliance and rewards dishonesty. The more he compromises, the more he loses sight of the person he once was, creating an inner void that he attempts to ignore. Unlike traditional villains, Ratan is not an inherently evil man; rather, he is an everyman figure who, in his desire for success, finds himself entangled in a web of ethical decay. His moral corruption is not driven by greed or malice but by his rationalization of small compromises that eventually define his entire existence. However, beneath his outward success lies a growing existential discomfort—a realization that despite his achievements, he is neither at peace with himself nor with the world around him. His existential crisis reaches its peak when he finally recognizes that the very system he served has left him hollow and disconnected from any real purpose.

Ratan's late realization of his alienation from his own values marks a turning point in his existential journey. This moment of self-awareness, where he acknowledges his moral failures, aligns with existentialist themes of personal responsibility and the burden of choice. In Sartrean terms, he can no longer live in *bad faith*—he must either accept his complicity in corruption or seek a path toward redemption. His realization is painful, as it forces him to confront the truth that his life has been built on self-deception. He understands that his alienation is not just from society but



from his own conscience, which he has silenced for years. This self-awareness, however, does not come with easy solutions; instead, it leads to deep regret and a desperate search for meaning in an otherwise meaningless existence. His story echoes the existentialist idea that individuals are condemned to define their own purpose, and Ratan, for most of his life, has defined his through power and status—only to find that they offer no real fulfillment.

In his final attempt to seek atonement, Ratan embarks on a journey of self-reconciliation, though it is unclear whether he ever truly redeems himself. His atonement is not a grand, dramatic gesture but rather an internal struggle to come to terms with his past. Unlike traditional narratives of redemption, where the protagonist finds closure, Ratan's atonement is open-ended, reinforcing the existentialist idea that life offers no easy resolutions—only a continuous process of self-examination and choice. He acknowledges his mistakes and seeks forgiveness, but whether he finds peace remains ambiguous. This unresolved conclusion aligns with Joshi's broader vision of existentialism, where the search for meaning is never fully complete, and individuals must constantly grapple with their past, their choices, and their responsibilities. Ratan's journey, in this sense, is not about achieving redemption but about the realization that redemption itself is an ongoing struggle, shaped by the weight of one's past actions and the effort to reconcile with them.

Through Ratan Rathor, Joshi presents a powerful critique of moral compromise in modern society, where ideals are often sacrificed at the altar of ambition. His story serves as a reflection on the existential cost of corruption—not just in terms of ethics but in terms of personal identity and psychological well-being. Ratan is not merely a corrupt bureaucrat; he is a man who has lost himself in the pursuit of success, only to realize, too late, that his journey has left him empty. His character embodies the existentialist struggle between integrity and survival, between self-deception and self-awareness, ultimately reinforcing the idea that human beings are constantly faced with choices that define their essence. In the end, *The Apprentice* does not offer a definitive answer to Ratan's crisis but instead leaves the reader with the unsettling truth that moral and existential redemption are not destinations but continuous processes—forever shaped by the choices one has made.

Conclusion

Arun Joshi's protagonists, whether Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner*, Som Bhaskar in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, or Ratan Rathor in *The Apprentice*, embody the existential struggles of alienation, identity crisis, and moral dilemmas in a rapidly changing world. Their journeys reflect the deep psychological conflicts that arise when individuals grapple with their place in society, the consequences of their choices, and the search for meaning in an indifferent world. Sindi's detachment and search for belonging, Som's struggle between civilization and primitivism, and Ratan's descent into moral corruption and subsequent regret all illustrate different facets of existentialism, highlighting the burden of freedom, responsibility, and the inevitability of self-reflection. Joshi's narratives do not offer clear resolutions but instead emphasize the perpetual human struggle to reconcile personal authenticity with societal expectations. Through these existential conflicts, Joshi critiques the modern condition, illustrating that alienation is both self-imposed and a product of external forces, and that true meaning can only be found through self-awareness and the courage to confront one's own reality.

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