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## The Fictional World of Arun Joshi : A Critical Appraisal

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### Abstract

*The fictional world of Arun Joshi, one of India's foremost contemporary novelists, is a compelling exploration of the human psyche, existential dilemmas, and socio-cultural contexts. This critical appraisal delves into the thematic and stylistic aspects of Joshi's works, highlighting his unique narrative voice and the philosophical underpinnings of his fiction. Joshi's novels, including "The Strange Case of Billy Biswas," "The Apprentice," "The Foreigner," and "The Last Labyrinth," offer profound insights into the alienation and spiritual quest of individuals grappling with the complexities of modern life. His characters often find themselves at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, seeking meaning and identity in a rapidly changing world. Through meticulous character development and rich, symbolic imagery, Joshi addresses themes of isolation, existential angst, and the search for self-*

*realization. This critical appraisal examines how Joshi's portrayal of internal and external conflicts resonates with broader socio-cultural issues, such as the impact of colonialism, the fragmentation of cultural identity, and the quest for authenticity in an increasingly materialistic society. By situating Joshi's works within the larger framework of Indian and global literature, this study sheds light on his enduring relevance and the universal appeal of his storytelling. Ultimately, this abstract provides a comprehensive overview of Arun Joshi's fictional universe, emphasizing his contributions to literature and his profound understanding of the human condition. Joshi's exploration of psychological and existential themes makes his work a significant and enduring part of literary discourse.*

### Key Words

*Existential theme, Psychoanalysis of characters, Sense of alienation, Cultural Identity, Impact of Colonialism, Spiritual dilemma.*

Arun Joshi is recognized as one of the most distinguished and thought-provoking novelists in Indian English literature. His works are known for their deep psychological insights, existential themes, and exploration of the human condition.

Arun Joshi's novels often delve into existential dilemmas, reflecting the influence of existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. His characters grapple with questions of meaning, identity, and the absurdity of life.

“The Foreigner,” the protagonist Sindi Oberoi struggles with feelings of alienation and searches for his true identity in a world that seems indifferent to his existence.

A recurrent theme in Joshi’s work is the sense of alienation and isolation experienced by his characters. This theme is particularly evident in “The Strange Case of Billy Biswas,” where the protagonist feels disconnected from the materialistic world and seeks solace in the tribal life of central India. Billy Biswas’s journey into the tribal areas symbolizes his quest for authenticity and escape from the superficiality of modern urban life. Joshi’s characters are often on a quest for meaning and purpose in life. This search takes them through various emotional and psychological landscapes, reflecting the complexities of the human experience. In “The Last Labyrinth,” Som Bhaskar’s obsessive search for fulfillment leads him into a labyrinth of desires, relationships, and existential crises. Joshi’s novels provide a critique of contemporary society, addressing issues such as materialism, corruption, and the loss of traditional values. His characters often find themselves at odds with societal norms and expectations.

“The Apprentice” explores the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by a young man in post-independence India, highlighting the clash between traditional values and modern aspirations. Arun Joshi’s characters are intricately crafted, with complex psychological profiles and rich inner lives. His ability to delve into the depths of his characters’ minds sets him apart as a novelist. Joshi uses symbolism and vivid imagery to enhance the thematic depth of his novels. His symbolic use of settings, objects, and actions adds layers of meaning to his narratives. Joshi’s narrative style is both engaging and introspective. He often employs a first-person narrative to provide intimate insights into the thoughts and emotions of his protagonists. His works are imbued with philosophical reflections, making them intellectually stimulating and thought-provoking. The existential questions posed by his characters resonate with readers seeking deeper understanding of life’s complexities.

Arun Joshi’s contribution to Indian English literature is significant and enduring. His exploration of existential themes, deep psychological insights, and critique of contemporary society make his novels profound and relatable. Through his richly developed characters and compelling narratives, Joshi invites readers to reflect on their own experiences and the broader human condition. Arun Joshi’s literary legacy continues to inspire and provoke thought, making him a pivotal figure in the landscape of Indian literature. His works remain relevant and impactful, offering timeless reflections on the human psyche and the search for meaning in an ever-changing world.

Arun Joshi’s first novel, *The Foreigner* (1993), depicts the alienation of the protagonist Sindi Oberoi and explores his anguished consciousness of being alienated from the conventions and rituals of his society. This anguish and alienation later on manifest themselves as the reasons for the identity conflict and main causes of the meaninglessness of his life. Sindi Oberoi was born in Kenya of an English mother and an Indian father. Though his father was an Indian, yet he could hardly call himself a Hindu. As if elaborating the point, he candidly confesses: “Anyway I can’t really be called a Hindu. My mother was English and my father, I am told, a sceptic. That doesn’t seem like a good beginning for a Hindu, does it” (Joshi, 20). Sindi remains a foreigner whether he is in London, Boston, or Delhi. He cannot think of himself as belonging to any country in particular and wonders: “did I belong to the world?” (55). But “the sense of foreignness that afflicts him and makes him alienated from others is not geographical, as it might appear on the surface, but that of his soul. Accordingly Sindi remarks:

“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 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”

This remark of his clearly evinces that he is experiencing rootlessness and alienation that result into the identity crisis. Living in Kenya, London and Boston, he undergoes various changes through personal experiences.

While in Kenya, he contemplates suicide, and when he comes to London, the same despair remains with him. A girl, Anna, seeks to rediscover her lost youth, and lives for him, but in response he gives her nothing and shows his liking for Kathy. Eventually Kathy abandons him. The broken relationship disturbs him, and in America he is “afraid of getting involved” (ibid, 53) with June Blyth, an American girl. Sindi’s parentage and early life made him a nowhere man. He cultivates a sense of detachment to overcome his painful past, which includes “Being a product of hybrid culture”. He is aware of his rootlessness. He wants to love June but is afraid of involvement and marriage. Hence he remarked: “I was afraid of possessing anybody and I was afraid of being possessed, and marriage meant both” (91).

The mystery of human existence terrifies him when he comes to know about the death of June due to an abortion. Babu’s death taught him only half the lesson, but he learns the remaining half when he comes to know about the death of June. “Consequently, he looks upon the world as a heap of crumbled illusions where nothing is real and permanent” (94). The nausea Sindi feels in his early days keeps him restless throughout life. He “sees no purpose in life and he finds himself living without a purpose” (97). This sickness remains with him even after he joins London University. He does well in the examinations, but he gets tired and bored with the lectures which, according to him, lack relevance to life. Sindi resembles T. S. Eliot’s “Hollow Men” and “J. Alfred Prufrock”. Lightly does Tapan Kumar Ghosh hold that: “... like T. S. Eliot’s straw men, he makes out an existence which is no better than death in life” (Tripathi, 120) Like Prufrock measuring out his life “with coffee spoons”, Sindi too contemplates:

My fifth Christmas on these alien shores. And yet all shores are alien when you don’t belong anywhere. Twenty fifth Christmas on this planet, twenty five years largely wasted in search of wrong things in wrong places. Twenty five years gone in search of peace, and what did I have to show for achievements; a ten stone body that had to be fed four times of a day, twenty eight times a week. This was the sum of a lifetime of striving. (96)

Also like Prufrock, he is unable to understand himself or his life. He too is lonely, all alone in the wild world. Although an Indian by birth, Sindi feels himself to be an outsider even in India. Shaila, Babu’s sister, tries to understand him but she too remarks: “You are still a foreigner, you don’t belong here” (122). There is intense sadness in Sindi which those who come into contact with him, June in America, Sheila, Mr. Khemkar in India, can feel in the very presence of the man. This he tries to explain to Mr. Khemka in the following manner:

“You had a clear cut system of morality, a caste system that laid down all you had to do. You had a God; you had roots in the soil you lived upon. Look at me. I have no roots. I have no system of morality. What does it mean to me if you call me an immoral man? I have no reason to be one thing or another. You ask me why I am not ambitious; well, I have no reason to be. Come to think of it I don’t even have a reason to live!”(118).

Thus, in *The Foreigner*, Joshi depicts the alienation of the protagonist Sindi Oberoi. It results into the identity conflict but the post- spiritualism gives him the salvation, an identity, and a meaning to his life. Besides, Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist of his debut novel *The Foreigner*, brings back to life many of the experiences encountered in his author’s youth.

*The Apprentice* is the one that describe the details of Indian society and Indian history-centred as it is on the episodes gravitating around the Indo-Chinese conflict (Vijyan, 52). It is narrated in spicy Indian English by the central character, Ratan Rathor. The fictional technique adopted by Arun Joshi is another important element that contributes to the uniqueness of *The Apprentice*.

So, that the novel has sometimes been tagged as a fictional experiment. Very ingeniously and with excellent oratorical skill, Ratan pours out the events of his life to a listener, whose name one never learns. Of this imaginary dialogue, however, Joshi brings to the text only the narrator’s speech and not his interlocutor’s, leaving the reader with the impression of a monologue. But, though apparently mute in the text, the listener is

extremely active in oiling the mechanisms of the conversation with Ratan. In fact, Joshi's secret is that the interlocutor is kept well hidden in the shades of discourse. As the story unfolds, one learns that he is young, well-mannered, patient, idealistic, and proud of being a National Cadet. He pays great attention to every detail of the story he is being told. Therefore, he is able to help Ratan to find the thread of his thoughts again every time the narrator's unavoidable digressions lead him to forget the starting point of his tale. His questions are wise and sharp and he is even said to take on the role of the inquisitor. However, his esteem for Ratan is so high that he does not hesitate to put all his other chores aside. In short, he is the ideal listener.

On the other hand, Ratan is the ideal orator, who needs a public to fully achieve his goal. One knows very little of his present situation until nearly the end of the novel, when his predicament is fully exposed. In the meantime, however, he grips the reader's attention, thanks to his brilliant use of a variety of rhetorical devices. Sentimental, self-cantered, as much a prisoner of his own telling as is his listener/reader (if not more so), an astute orator-deceiver; he is the one who, for instance, humbly declares: "Let me not, however, get on the pulpit again. I have not the right" (102), while knowing full well that he would not go on was he not relentlessly in a commanding position. Ratan Rathor is a little past middle age, talks with the self-confidence of an experienced man, and is educated, sensible and extremely intelligent.

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is the story of a young, rich, America-educated Indian who ends up in the wilderness of central India living as a semi-naked "tribal" (Walter, 91) seeking a meaning to things above and beyond all that everyday civilization can provide. A key to Joshi's whole intent can be found in the narrator's realisation that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood.

*The City and the River*, Joshi's last novel, came out some ten years after *The Last Labyrinth*, a considerable span of time if one takes into consideration that the novelist took only a little more than a decade to publish his other four novels, a collection of short stories and a book illustrating the history of the philanthropic institution he worked for. *The City and the River*; the city is not the Delhi or the Bombay Joshi has elsewhere described so concretely but a wholly intangible place, removed from time, where nonetheless a man can be seen wearing jeans. Joshi, in his search for a way to describe the meaning of things, has now come to a world akin to those of science fiction or perhaps to the mystical poetry of Blake writing of "Golgonooza the spiritual Fourfold London eternal" (Tharoor, 63). But all the while there are digs or sly hints at the current ills of Indian society and, by implication, of all societies. And in the final pages, where the wild river sweeps over the whole complex city, there is, again, sounded that faint note of hope. The question is not of success or failure, an old yogi tells his disciple; the question is of trying. Of all the author's novels, in fact, *The City and the River* is the one, which can best be described as "fictional experiment" (Stem, 35), despite the fact that this label was used for other works of his, *The Apprentice* in particular.

Following the vogue of *Midnight's Children*, *The City and the River* tries to exhume the legends of ancient Indian epics—chiefly the Upanishads, in which an old sage teaches a lesson of life to a talented disciple and incorporate them within a postmodern structure and significance. As is already evident in the title, the book emphasises two separate and hostile worlds, another interpretation of the typical dichotomy in Joshi's vision: the Bombay and the Benares of *The Last Labyrinth*, the Delhi and the Maikala Hills of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. The passage from the eighties to the nineties in India, however, marks a significant shift in the taste and orientation of the reading public as far as the fiction written in English was concerned.

The arrival, and enormous success, of Rushdie's novels had caused ferment in what had been a static situation and it is likely that *The City and the River* embodied a turn in Joshi's literary output, partly in an effort to exploit the new world.

The story told here is that after a disturbing dream, interpreted as a harbinger of problems by the Astrologer, the Great Master of the City resolves to strengthen his authority. Surrounding himself with a group of ambitious, sycophant ministers, he tries to win the boatmen's sympathies. They represent the other pole in

the city, the poor who still live according to tradition and have made an alliance with the River. Nevertheless, they are not taken in by the Great Master's cajoling, who consequently feels the need to employ stronger measures to make the boatmen submit: mass imprisonment, torture, even total destruction. His novels, delving into existentialism along with the ethical choices a man has to make, won him huge critical appreciation in India, but remained largely unknown in the West.

Arun Joshi, a writer in the pre-Rushdie era, deals with the mystery and darkness of human mind. His novels, probing into existentialism along with the ethical choices a man has to make, won him huge critical appreciation in India, but remained largely unknown in the West. Psychiatry was the basic interest of Arun Joshi. Most of the writings by Arun Joshi are filled up with his personal experiences right from his youth. Perhaps this is the reason that most of his writings have an array of autobiographical elements. Arun Joshi is a novelist who, more strongly than most, has brought to his work the detachment from the everyday, while still acknowledging its existence, which is perhaps India's particular gift to the literature of the world. The rising up into the transcendental is a trait that has increasingly marked out his novels from his first, *The Foreigner* where the young hero, after experiencing life and love in America, is, back in Delhi, at last persuaded by a humble office worker that sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved up to *The City and the River*, which takes place wholly in an imaginary land.

To venture as a writer into such territory, it is necessary to be equipped with the means to make the everyday credible and sharply present. This Joshi was from the start well able to do, as his early short stories, subsequently collected in *Survivor*, clearly show. "The Gherao" tells simply and effectively of how a young college teacher arrives at maturity when his aged Principal is subjected to that peculiar Indian form of protest action, the Gherao, the preventing of a target figure from moving anywhere or receiving any succour. In *The Last Labyrinth*, the hero, if that always is not too strong a term for the men Joshi puts at the centre, is a man crying always: "I want! I want!" and not knowing what it is he desires, in some ways a parallel figure to Saul Bellow's Henderson, the rain king. His search takes him, however, to infinitely old Benares, a city seen as altogether intangible, at once holy and repellent, and to an end lost in a miasma of non-understanding. But the way there is gripping. Joshi writes with a persuasive ease and illuminates the outward scene with telling phrase after telling phrase.

The conflict in Arun Joshi's novel plays a decisive role. However, the "conflict" (ibid, 41), as theme itself, is multidimensional and has theoretical background and historical significance in various authors. Having defined the bounds of the term post-colonial, one must determine how the works of these authors utilize such a construct. Such constructs are created and utilised by the writers using the conflict—necessary elements of the fictional work. It is often classified according to the nature of the protagonist or antagonist. Conflict is the struggle between the opposing forces on which the action in a work of literature depends. There are five basic forms of conflict: person versus person, person versus self, person versus nature, person versus society, and person versus God.

Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy once commented that all happy families resemble each other, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own unique way. Tolstoy's observation may be the reason why no one writes stories about perfect harmony. Conflict is simply easier to scrounge up, and it is almost always more interesting. Person versus self is the theme in literature that places a character against his own will, confusion, or fears. It can also be where a character tries to find out who he is or comes to a realisation or a change in character. Although the struggle is internal, the character can be influenced by external forces. The struggle of the human being to come to a decision is the basis of person versus self.

## Conclusion

Thus the conflict that erupts in the protagonists of Arun Joshi's novels has the forms of craziness, pain, agony, the selfishness of love and the mystic realities of life. It centres upon various aspects of life, bringing out

its vitality. It highlights the normal and the abnormal, the ordinary and the extraordinary, illusion and reality and resignation and desire and other Applying sociological, psycho-analytical, structural approaches of formal textual analysis, the thesis takes a fresh look at Arun Joshi's works, revealing areas and stances, hitherto left unexplored. It offers critical insights into the working of the protagonists' minds, besides scrutinising the rhetorical devices and formal strategies, deployed by the novelist for matter with the manner.

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