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## “Existential Dilemmas And The Alienated Self In Arun Joshi’s Protagonists”

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### Abstract:

This paper explores the recurring themes of existentialism and alienation in the novels of Arun Joshi, one of India's most profound psychological and philosophical fiction writers. Through a close reading of his major works—*The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, *The Apprentice*, and *The Last Labyrinth*—the study highlights how Joshi's protagonists are often educated, urban individuals who feel disconnected from their surroundings and themselves. Caught in a conflict between modern materialism and a deeper spiritual longing, they undergo existential crises marked by isolation, disillusionment, and a desperate search for meaning. The paper also examines how Joshi blends Western existential philosophy with Indian spiritual traditions, offering a unique lens through which human suffering and self-realization are depicted. Ultimately, the study reveals how Joshi's fiction not only reflects the alienation of the postcolonial Indian psyche but also universalizes the inner turmoil of modern existence.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Alienation, Identity crisis, Indian English fiction, psychological realism, Modern man, Spiritual void

**Introduction:** Arun Joshi, a significant figure in Indian English literature, is renowned for his introspective novels that delve into the psychological and philosophical dilemmas of modern man. His works are deeply rooted in existential themes, reflecting the anxieties and alienation of individuals caught between tradition and modernity. In a society rapidly transitioning due to globalization and cultural shifts, Joshi's characters often appear lost, rootless, and emotionally detached. They struggle to find purpose and belonging in an environment that seems increasingly impersonal and fragmented. This study aims to critically examine how existentialism and alienation operate as central motifs in Joshi's select novels, particularly *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, *The Apprentice*, and *The Last Labyrinth*. Through these narratives, Joshi not only presents the psychological depth of his protagonists but also raises fundamental questions about identity, freedom, and spiritual emptiness in contemporary life. The study will explore how Joshi fuses Western existential philosophy with Indian metaphysical thought, creating a distinctive narrative voice in Indian English fiction.

**“Arun Joshi’s Existential Universe :Alienation ,Identity and Inner Awakening in Modern Indian Fiction”**

In *Foreigner* Sindi Oberoi’s sense of detachment: "I have always found it difficult to belong. To any group. Any sect. Any society." (Joshi,32). This line captures Sindi’s fundamental alienation and existential detachment from social and cultural systems. He distances himself emotionally to avoid pain or moral responsibility. Sindi expresses a relativistic, almost nihilistic worldview. Sindi is a character caught between cultures. Born of an Indian father and a foreign mother, and raised in multiple countries, he feels no deep connection to any place, culture, or ideology. His statement—"I have always found it difficult to belong..."—underscores his existential

homelessness. This mirrors Martin Heidegger's concept of "Unheimlichkeit" (unhomeliness or not-being-at-home), a state where one feels estranged from the world. Karl Marx described alienation in terms of estrangement from society, while Sindi's is more personal—emotional and spiritual alienation. Sindi keeps relationships superficial and avoids moral commitment. He even resists helping June's brother though it would be the "right" thing to do. "Good, bad—these are words that people have invented..." – Sindi's relativism here reflects Nietzsche's rejection of objective morality and Camus's absurdism, where life is inherently meaningless and humans must create their own values. Camus's Echo: Like Meursault in *The Stranger*, Sindi refuses to conform to emotional expectations of society. Sindi is wary of intimacy and emotional dependence. When June offers love, Sindi recoils—not out of arrogance, but because of deep existential anxiety. This is central to Sartre's notion of "bad faith", where a person denies responsibility for authentic emotional engagement due to fear of being defined by others. Arun Joshi uses this to highlight modern man's spiritual crisis, where personal freedom becomes a burden rather than a gift. By the end, Sindi undergoes some change. He decides to help Babu despite earlier reluctance, hinting at an existential awakening. His action resembles a leap of faith, suggesting that even in a meaningless world, one can choose ethical responsibility. This marks a turning point: from passive detachment to active moral agency—a key resolution in existentialist literature. Sindi Oberoi (Joshi): Indian version of existential anti-hero—caught in the postcolonial search for meaning in a fractured world. Sindi as the Modern Existential Hero. Sindi's journey is a powerful existential parable. Joshi uses his inner turmoil to explore: The emptiness of modern relationships, The challenge of constructing meaning The pain of alienation in a globalized yet fragmented world. He resists moral absolutes, echoing existentialist ideas like those of Sartre and Camus where meaning and morality are individually constructed "Good, bad—these are words that people have invented. I don't understand them. I only know what gives me peace."(joshi,64) The stark dismissal of love reflects Sindi's emotional disconnection and fear of vulnerability—central to his existential condition.

Billy Biswas, the protagonist of Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, embodies the existential struggle for authenticity, identity, and meaning in a society he finds deeply alienating. Billy recognizes a dissonance between his outer persona (urban, elite, foreign-educated man) and his inner self, which seeks something primal, spiritual, and more authentic. This reflects Søren Kierkegaard's concept of the "true self"—which must be discovered through inward reflection, not through imposed roles. Billy's "buried self" is symbolic of repressed identity in a world driven by materialism and performance. Billy's choice to abandon urban life for tribal existence reflects Albert Camus's "revolt" against an absurd world. It also mirrors Heidegger's authenticity—where one escapes the "they-self" (Das Man), or the anonymous social identity, to live authentically according to one's own essence. The forest in the novel is not just a physical space—it's a metaphor for inner consciousness, Spiritual awakening, Existential freedom. The forest contrasts with urban Delhi, representing freedom from societal constraints and a return to something elemental and raw. Billy is portrayed as mentally and emotionally dislocated from the rational, materialistic society he is part of. His discomfort in elite circles and fascination with tribal life symbolize: Alienation from capitalist modernity (echoing Marx and Lukács). Rejection of false consciousness—he sees the hypocrisy in modern existence.

Joshi uses Billy to critique a society where spiritual needs are repressed in favor of economic ambition. Billy dies in the forest—but his death isn't tragic in the conventional sense. This fits Nietzsche's idea that life's meaning isn't found in comfort or conformity but in the courage to live authentically, even at great personal cost. Meursault in Camus's *The Stranger*: Chooses truth over social expectation, even if it leads to death. Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*: Leaves society to forge his soul in his own way. Billy Biswas: Indian counterpart—rejects Western rationalism for tribal mysticism. Billy Biswas is Joshi's most profound existential character—a man who breaks away from the superficialities of the modern world in pursuit of truth, selfhood, and transcendence. "Love? I do not know what that means. It sounds like a disease, a kind of fever."(Joshi,72)"Good, bad—these are words that people have invented. I don't understand them. I only know what gives me peace." (Joshi 52).It depicts the confusion and emotional alienation. "Love? I do not know what that means. It sounds like a disease, a kind of fever." (Joshi 61) "There was something fundamentally wrong with the world I lived in... I could not laugh, I could not weep, I could not pray."(Joshi 72)The strange case of Billy Biswas reflects Billy's profound existential discontent with modern, materialistic life. "I was fed up with cocktail parties, bridge games, and hunting weekends. I wanted something more primitive, more elemental."(Joshi76) depicts his rejection of bourgeois life: Billy expresses disillusionment with Westernized, upper-class Indian society, seeking instead something raw and authentic. Joshi's leap of faith can be reflected by "I had to go, Romi.

There was no other way. I could no longer live in a world where the spirit had died."(Joshi,45)This is Billy's Kierkegaardian moment, where he makes a decisive leap from rational society into intuitive, tribal life. Billy realizes that his true identity cannot be expressed in the societal roles he's been forced to play. "I am not what I seem. I have never been. My real self is buried deep in the forests."(Joshi,60)"He was a man who walked out of our world in search of a truth we could not see." (Joshi,75)This summarizes Billy's existential quest as seen by others—a journey toward meaning, even if it appears irrational.

This paper offers a rich existential and psychological exploration of Ratan Rathor, the protagonist of Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice*. Let's analyze the key themes of self-deception, guilt, alienation, and existential choice, supported by your quoted lines: "Every night the ledgers haunted me—rows of numbers whispering my betrayal." (Joshi, 57). This haunting imagery reflects Ratan's inner torment. The ledgers symbolize not just financial misdeeds, but a moral account book—a reminder of his complicity in corruption. The language evokes Dostoevskian guilt, where guilt manifests psychologically, becoming an inescapable inner voice. It aligns with existentialist views (Sartre, Camus) that human beings carry the burden of their actions when they deny their authentic selves. "I sat among colleagues yet remained a stranger—my soul barred behind the doors of my deceit." (Joshi, 89) This line captures existential alienation. Despite being surrounded by people, Ratan feels isolated due to his hidden guilt. His "soul barred" implies an internal split—his inauthentic outward life versus his hidden moral failure. This mirrors Sartre's idea of "bad faith," where individuals lie to themselves to avoid confronting their true choices. This is a direct existential awakening. Ratan realizes he chose material security over ethical integrity—yet tried to shift blame to "fate". This echoes Sartre's central thesis in *Existentialism is a Humanism*: "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. The phrase "condemned to choose" is a paraphrase of Sartre's most famous existential assertion, reinforcing that freedom is inescapable and so is responsibility. Ratan initially rationalizes his corruption—believing it's a survival necessity. But existentialists like Kierkegaard and Sartre warn that self-deception destroys authentic existence, leading to a life of inner dissonance. By the novel's end, Ratan attempts moral restitution by guiding a young man not to repeat his mistakes. He doesn't undo the past but accepts responsibility, showing existential growth through ethical action. Unlike Billy (who escapes), Ratan stays within society and seeks redemption, making *The Apprentice* a more moral existential narrative. Ratan Rathor is a deeply existential character, not because he rebels against society like Billy, but because he embodies with The modern man's ethical failures, his struggle for authenticity and finally, a painful yet honest confrontation with the consequences of his freedom. Ratan Rathor, a morally compromised government clerk, lives in constant dread of exposure for his corrupt practices. His professional success brings him neither pride nor peace—only the gnawing burden of guilt. As he confronts the consequences of his choices, Ratan embodies Sartre's concept of "bad faith," repeatedly deceiving himself to avoid responsibility for his actions. The novel explores:

Ratan's refusal to own up to his wrongdoing depicts by "Every night the ledgers haunted me—rows of numbers whispering my betrayal." (Joshi, 57) The inner torment that arises when one's actions violate personal and social ethics. "I sat among colleagues yet remained a stranger—my soul barred behind the doors of my deceit."(Joshi 89).Self-deception through rationalizations that deny one's freedom and responsibility. "Man is condemned to choose—and I had chosen comfort over conscience. Yet I blamed fate."(Joshi 145)

*The Last Labyrinth* follows Som Bhaskar, a wealthy industrialist and intellectual who becomes entangled in a deeply psychological and spiritual crisis. Caught between his obsession with a mysterious woman, Anuradha, and his own spiritual longing, Som navigates a world that is both sensual and symbolic, struggling to find meaning in a life that feels increasingly absurd. The novel is layered with Freudian desire and Vedantic spirituality, mirroring the internal duality of modern man—the search for liberation through passion and detachment.

Major Existential and Psychological Themes used in the novel *The Last Labyrinth*. "I had everything a man could want, yet I was hollow. I was a question without an answer."(Joshi, *The Last Labyrinth* 33)Alienation and absurdity reveals Som experiences life as meaningless despite success, reflecting existential despair (Camus, Sartre).Metaphysical longing depicts in his yearning for something beyond the material is a Vedantic echo of moksha (liberation). "What is this hunger that no food can satisfy? What is this fire that burns without flame?"(Joshi 71)Sexual obsession and repression can be seen by Freudian elements surface in his intense,

confusing relationship with Anuradha. “She was mystery, seduction, and salvation, all rolled into one. I both feared and needed her.”(Joshi 59). Som is caught in a labyrinth of desires, doubts, and detachment, struggling to understand who he truly is. “We live and die in circles, and in between we pretend there is purpose.”(Joshi 106)

The City and the River is a deeply symbolic and allegorical novel. Unlike Joshi’s other psychologically intense first-person narratives, this work presents a broader collective portrait of a society suffering under authoritarian rule. The novel critiques political oppression, blind conformity, and spiritual decay, making it resonate with existential philosophy and postcolonial disillusionment. The unnamed Grand Master is an authoritarian ruler who tries to control even the natural flow of the river—representing truth, freedom, and cosmic order. His efforts are challenged by the Boatman, a humble and enlightened figure symbolizing existential defiance, individual conscience, and natural harmony. Citizens live in fear and mechanical obedience, losing personal agency and spiritual depth. “We wake when they tell us, we eat what we are given, we speak when permitted. We no longer remember who we were.”(Joshi 45)The Grand Master’s rule represents the absurd repression of the human spirit. “He would command even the river if he could. And perhaps he already has.”(Joshi, The City and the River 18)The Boatman symbolizes Sartrean authenticity—choosing to act in defiance of meaningless tyranny. “You may dam the waters, Grand Master, but you cannot still the currents within men.”(Joshi 91)

People become functionaries, not human beings—trapped in routines, systems, and ideologies that alienate them from their inner selves. Echoes Marx's concept of alienation: workers (or citizens) are estranged from their labor, dreams, and essence. It also aligns with Joshi’s recurring existential theme: how urban materialism replaces inner freedom with societal programming. In Indian philosophy, especially Vedanta and the Bhagavad Gita, rivers symbolize the transient world, and the wise man is one who sees permanence beyond the flow. The river represents cosmic order (Rta)—just, eternal, and unaffected by human pride or politics. Joshi also uses it existentially. To “flow with it” implies accepting life’s absurdity (Camus), embracing change, and letting go of control. “Be broken” represents those who resist life’s inevitable chaos and change—they suffer more deeply due to rigid expectations. Like the indifferent universe in Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the river is neutral—neither rewarding nor punishing. It is truth in motion, a mirror to inner liberation, not external order. While society becomes corrupt, the river remains pure and eternal—suggesting that truth and justice are not external systems, but inner realizations. Political structures (“thrones and decrees”) crumble, but truth flows on—quiet, consistent, unstoppable. Individuals in the city become mere cogs in the system—depersonalized and spiritually void. “The people had forgotten the taste of freedom. Their dreams no longer belonged to them.”(Joshi 63) “The river flows, indifferent to thrones and decrees. One must learn to flow with it or be broken.”(Joshi 106).The river stands for truth, flow of time, inner freedom, and cosmic justice—untouched by political corruption.

Arun Joshi’s novels present a rich canvas of existentialism and alienation, weaving together Western philosophical concepts with Indian spiritual and sociocultural contexts. Despite the critical acclaim of his works, there remains a significant research gap in exploring how his treatment of alienation extends beyond individual psyche to reflect collective, political, and spiritual dimensions, particularly in *The City and the River* and *The Apprentice*. Through characters like Sindi Oberoi, Billy Biswas, Ratan Rathor, Som Bhaskar, and the Boatman, Joshi dramatizes the inner crisis of modern individuals torn between conformity and authenticity, reason and intuition, materialism and transcendence. While earlier scholarship has focused primarily on Joshi's psychological depth, this study has sought to bridge the gap by contextualizing his existential themes within larger frameworks—social ethics, postcolonial identity, and Eastern metaphysics. In *The Stranger*, Sindi seeks peace by detaching from societal roles—like flowing with the river. In *The Apprentice*, Ratan learns too late that integrity is internal, not institutional. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Billy literally returns to nature—to flow with the primal, not the artificial. The River as Joshi’s Metaphor for Authentic Life. The river represents: Time, truth, inner stillness, and freedom from systems and acceptance of life's movement without illusion. Joshi uses it as a contrast to the deadened urban world, where dreams and freedom have been commodified.

In conclusion, Joshi’s fiction not only exemplifies existential alienation but also gestures toward liberation through self-awareness, resistance, and spiritual inquiry—making his work a uniquely Indian contribution to global existential literature.

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