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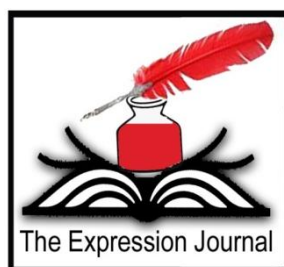


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CRISIS OF IDENTITY IN ARUN JOSHI'S *THE FOREIGNER*: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION

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Abstract

Arun Joshi's first novel *The Foreigner* deals with the theme of alienation and the crisis of identity. He has taken up this problem in his other novels also. He is concerned with the predicaments faced by modern humans, their lack of belongingness, the protagonist of the novel *The Foreigner* feels like a foreigner everywhere. The crisis of identity, a by-product of alienation is one of the most agonising experiences of modern man. Existentialism as a philosophy has significantly impacted the lives of modern men who experienced existential dilemmas and anguishes, making them question their existence's very purpose and thus embarking on a search for one's identity. Arun Joshi's works represent the angst of modern man and the vacuity in which he is trapped. *The Foreigner* is a living example of how existential anguishes can mar a man's life. The paper "Crisis of Identity in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*" explores the existential anguishes of the protagonist Sindi Oberoi to manifest the realms of absurdity and estrangement that he suffers from due to his loneliness and rootlessness, the term existentialism has come into use in the twentieth century, and the concept has evolved with human advancement. Questions regarding the purpose of life have been a part of Indian Philosophy. In the novel too the hero realizes that to exist one needs to act and to focus on action not on the fruit of action. The readers see that all is not dark and doomed as the hero shows a tremendous capacity for transcendence. The end of the novel sees the metamorphosis of Sindi as rootless hedonist into an individual committed to social welfare.

Keywords

Existential Dilemma, Indian Sensibility, Modernity, Nothingness, Rootlessness, Sindi Oberoi,
The Foreigner, Vacuity.

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Indian Writing has the unique contrapuntal amalgamation of Eastern and Western philosophical traditions and philosophies as, due to the colonial encounter, the educated Indians came in contact with Western modernity and, in many ways, were affected by it. In Indian culture and civilization, spiritualism and emotional connection had a significant role to play in living one's life, but the dismissal of traditional values by modern mindset in India has created an environment of perplexity and pressure in which a person finds himself/herself completely puzzled and impasse. A solid value system and faith does not let one realize the existentialist absurdities of life and be content with what one has and move on in life, there are many who due to their contact with the western theoretical premises and practicalities, often suffer from the existential angst that the modern western man suffers from. Arun Joshi in his novels shows this crisis of identity, feeling of alienation faced by people amidst amazing scientific advancements and immense materialistic comforts that modern life offers.

Existentialism is a philosophy that lays stress on the significance of free will, choice, and responsibility that one should take for the choices one makes. This perspective emphasizes the unique experiences of each individual and the responsibility of each person for their choices and what they make of themselves. Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, Kierkegaard, and others have been significant in understanding the angst and anxieties that modern men suffer from, leading them to question their own meaningless life. The Existentialist philosophers heavily influenced modernist literature, and the modernist writers, poets, and dramatists in their literary works often made their protagonists question the very parameter of their existence and their roles in this world, thereby questioning the very parameter of their own identity as well as that of the civilization and culture.

The prominent motif in existentialist writing is that of choice – the choices men make that affect their lives and that of others. For example, in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the two tramps – Vladimir and Estragon – with their existentialist despair, wait for someone named Godot, who never arrives. These two tramps choose to wait for him knowing very well that Godot may never arrive, yet they choose to wait for Godot forever. So, if, on the one hand, Existentialism seems

to be very dark and depressing, then on the other, the philosophers argue that it is about making choices and then accepting the responsibilities for the same.

Arun Joshi, amongst all the Indian English writers, seems to be most influenced by existentialist philosophers. From his initial work, *The Foreigner* to *The City and the River*, there has always been an undercurrent of existentialist philosophical ethos, making readers feel its presence and experience the unusual situations in which Joshi's protagonists are trapped (Dhawan, 1986). Human predicament against all odds has been a concern of Joshi, and he thus explores the human psyche in his novel, where he purports to unravel the mystery that life is all about.

The modern man suffers from nothingness and vacuity due to the lack of commitment, and most Western modernist writers have well portrayed the social and cultural situation. Joshi is following in their footsteps. However, one cannot say that Joshi was consciously imitating them. On the other hand, the vacuity that his protagonists suffer from is their own and something that is not borrowed. Joshi is primarily concerned with the concrete action directed towards the individual free to choose life amidst the nothingness and abyss surrounding us.

Modern civilization is such that human beings, when pitted against its rash materialism and lack of spiritual depth, they tend to confront the harsh realities of life, which lead to the most challenging question that can threaten the very essence of human life and can make one feel the meaninglessness of the whole purpose. This inner crisis of modern man makes modernist literature so intriguing and exciting as the abysmal depth of the human consciousness is explored to understand what life has to offer. Arun Joshi visualized this crisis very well in the predicament of modern man, and thus went about representing the same in his works with utmost seriousness.

When his first novel, *The Foreigner*, was published in 1968, it received immediate fame as the existential dilemma of the protagonist with his traumas and tensions. Arun Joshi's psychological exploration of the same made it appear that there is something new in Indian writing in English that was never explored in such depth (Srinath, 1986). His protagonist seems to explore the very purpose which makes a man's life find relevance in society's dark void. The protagonist, Sindi Oberoi, is an immigrant Indian on his journey to find the meaning of his own life as he finds himself alienated in the context he is thrown into.

The crisis of identity and existential dilemmas that Western heroes suffer from in the twentieth century find resonance in his life narrative. Sindi Oberoi seems to be an existentialist character – a rootless, restless, and luckless man in a mad and absurd world. He is a perennial outsider, an uprooted young man living in the second half of the twentieth century who belongs to no country or people. "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(55). Sindi feels alienated everywhere - in Kenya, England, America, Uganda, and India. His rootlessness is rooted within his soul like a curse, driving him from one crisis to another. Sindi is trapped in his loneliness and solitude. He has withdrawn himself from society; thus, his loneliness knows no bounds.

The diasporic context of Sindi Oberoi is also significant here. When one leaves one's home country, one gets immediately disconnected from the culture, tradition, and land to which one belongs, which often causes distress and a sense of loneliness. The sense of rootlessness that Sindi suffers from, to a greater extent, is responsible for the lack of connections that he feels he has because of his diasporic situation too. A sense of alienation seeps into the soul as one is cut off from one's culture and traditions, which can mar one's spiritual recesses and lead to a certain void. Sindi seems to be experiencing that void within as he is not at home with the places he is situated in. What oppresses him most is the realization that he is a lonely man who is a foreigner everywhere. In such a situation, Arun Joshi portrays Sindi as a man suffering the most because of his existential dilemmas and aloofness in approaching his life and context. Sindi seems purely detached, having a business-

like attitude towards life and people. Sitting expressionless, he watches the world go by and his mind occupied with thoughts regarding his identity crises “Twenty-five years gone in search of, peace and what did I have to show for achievement ten stone body that had to be fed four times a day, twenty-eight times a week. This was the sum of a life-time of striving.”

June tries to involve him in a conversation to learn more about him. However, being too full of himself and alienated, he does not find it easy to converse with her and feels uncomfortable. He changes the subject to save himself from the discomfort of talking about himself. He desires to possess her physically but wildly struggles to remain uninvolved. At a time when one cannot be sure about oneself and has raging questions burning within oneself, it is difficult for the person to attach oneself to others and form meaningful relationships. Sindi is thus the haunted individual who seems to be not at peace with himself as he is continually haunted by his rootlessness, loneliness, and traumas (Prasad 1982).

Sindi has to wander from one place to another and one person to another in search of meaning in life, but he does not look within where the problem lies as he has alienated himself from all around him. Without enjoying the sense of well-being and happiness provided by emotional bonds, he remains suspicious of all involvements and makes detachment the creed of his life. His belief in detachment is a mask to cover his inability to reach out to people, love them, belong to them, and understand them. June's sincere efforts to involve him in a loving union fail because he stubbornly refuses to loosen his grip on his creed of detachment and non-involvement. It is not that Sindi is to be blamed for the same, as he is in no position to commit himself to a relationship. With these existential traumas and abyss, he cannot choose to be in a relationship, as he has business like attitude towards the world and people. However, when one forms relationships, one finds meaning in life – by making such a choice, one can escape the trap of absurdity of existence and find some meaning in the otherwise dark world in which one is trapped. Sindi too advances from estrangement to engagement from alienation to attachment from detachment to involvement.

Even though Arun Joshi tries to portray the trapped life of his protagonist in *The Foreigner*, he does not live the way Western existential philosopher like Albert Camus suggests that there are only two ways to deal with absurdity – either to take one's life or to accept the purposelessness of life and choose to champion that purposelessness. Joshi, being brought up in the Indian philosophical and intellectual tradition, did not allow his protagonist to carry on with his absurdity and make choices that seemed more, if not equally, absurd. So, Arun Joshi makes Sindi go through the quest of life and not end in despair. Though existentialism as a philosophy makes human beings aware of the absurdity of human existence, it is not a dark and doomed world to which the philosophers engage the readers; it is about the means to transcend that absurdity and find a purpose in life.

Existentialism is, thus, a theory that manifests the very essence of modern human civilization from the point of view of how human life is surrounded by absurdities where he has supposedly limited free will to do what he feels like and thus more or less life has to be pursued in the same manner as being destined. The question of free will versus predestination is at the core of the existentialist debate though it has been a philosophical discourse for a long time. The routine monotony and boredom of the sameness of life and its mechanical repetition in the industrial age, along with the anguishes caused by the World Wars and the spiritual vacuity that the age suffered from, led to people finding ways to deal with the metaphysical aspects of their lives. Another significant Existentialist philosopher of the age, Albert Camus, compares the life of a modern man with the mythical Sisyphus, who is doomed to carry the burden to the top of the hill for it to be rolling down again and again; and the pursuit continues.

The meaningless routine pursuits of modern man made it impossible for him to have a coherent and cohesive view of life. The existentialist philosophers made it the concern of their

writings. In the essay “Existence precedes Essence,” Jean-Paul Sartre fervently appeals to the modern man to take up ‘responsibility’ for what he chooses to become and do – “... if existence does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, existentialism’s first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility for his existence rest on him. Moreover, when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his individuality, but that he is responsible for all men ...” (Sartre 26). Thus, what Sartre claims in the essay is that it is evident that modern man will suffer from some anguishes and live under the pressure of living with the burden that Sisyphus has to carry compulsorily. However, despite that, modern man needs to take the burden and stand on his own feet, not only for his own sake; but also for humanity. Sartre’s appeal is to make modern men understand that all of us are going through a specific crisis – the crisis of a whole civilization.

Sindi is portrayed to be judicious enough not to find just absurdity and estrangement as the ultimate condition of life and shows a tremendous capacity for transcendence. Sindi comes out of the impasse after intense suffering, confessing after June’s death: “Detachment at that time had meant inaction. Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it. The Gods had set a heavy price to teach me just that” (Joshi 162). Sindi’s conversation with Muthu further make him realize that detachment means getting involved with the world, displaying immense courage and empathy he saves many people from losing their source of earning. Sindi finally realizes where he has gone wrong. We see him arriving at peace with himself, smiling and amused.

Thus, the author attempts a severe probe into humanity's existential problems and quest for identity and spiritual disturbances by focusing on specific individual characters like Sindi, who, through his problems, point out to the readers how there are more things in heaven and earth than just materialistic pleasures. A sense of alienation and anguish is often enough to put a person in an existential dilemma, but it is up to him/her make efforts for transcendence from that state of dilemma. This choice of making efforts to deal with the dilemma and angst makes the modern man heroic as he tries to transcend from these inner recesses of the mind to emerge as a hero. Sindi cannot be called a hero in the traditional sense of the term. But he comes out of his feeling of leading a meaningless existence and finds a purpose in life.

His propensity for transcendence from his absurd situation makes us realize that we must choose when existential dilemmas haunt us to move forward to a life of purpose. Arun Joshi’s novels, especially *The Foreigner*, thus provides lessons to the readers that a spiritual heritage is what can save humankind from the angst that Western materialism can lead one into. India may have experienced the gross materialism of the West, and that too much blinded many. Still, at the same time, it is the Indian spiritual traditions and philosophy that have probably saved us as we still have the chance of transcending from that state of hopelessness to a world of belief and faith because of the Indian traditions.

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