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**Aspects of Western Existential Philosophy and Indian Scriptures as
Manifested in the Novels of Arun Joshi**

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Abstract: *Literature and Philosophy, though being different disciplines, have influenced each other for time immemorial. Indian English literature, especially fiction has gained much attention at world level at the present day. With the emergence of the writers like Anita Desai and Arun Joshi on the field at post-independence era, Indian English Novel took a new turn. A new dimension of philosophical and psychological delineation of the inner happening of the human mind which can be considered as existential is added to it. The present paper aims at finding the aspects of Western existential philosophy and Indian scriptures in the novels of Arun Joshi. Arun Joshi is one such writer who has tried to display the existential problems of the modern man. Joshi presents the blend of both Western and Indian philosophical traditions in his novels and finds ultimate solutions for the complex problems of life in the Karma philosophy of the Gita which provides an affirmative realization of the true 'self' and the purpose of life. Existentialism as a philosophical movement emerged in the mid-19th and 20th century in the western philosophy. This philosophy treats man as an existent rather than man as thinking subject. The prominent base of it is in the famous dictum "Existence precedes essence" given by Sartre. Joshi's *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and *The Apprentice* represent three ways of redemption as preached in the Bhagavadgita: the Karmayoga, the Jnanayoga and the Bhaktiyoga respectively.*

Key Words: *Existentialism, Existence, Alienation, Meaninglessness, Rootlessness, Indian Scriptures, The Bhagavad-Gita, Redemption*

Introduction:

Literature and Philosophy, though being different disciplines, have influenced each other for time immemorial. Both have contributed in the development of the study concerning the understanding of human mind. Indian English literature, especially fiction has gained much attention at world level at the present day. Historically the journey of Indian English novel has passed through various phases which comprises of social realism, Gandhian Ideology, Partition, East-West encounter etc. But with the emergence of the writers like Anita Desai and Arun Joshi on the field at post-independence era, Indian English Novel took a new turn. A new dimension of philosophical and psychological delineation of the inner happening of the human mind is added to it. Earlier the novelists paid attention to the outer world and social problems which have been replaced by the description of the inner psyche and the problems of the identity which can be considered existential by a new breed of second-generation writers. Madhusudan Prasad has observed that, "Existentialism has been one of the major influences in the evolution of Indian Novel in English. So dominant was its sway on Indian literary imagination during early sixties and late seventies that it had led to the emergence of a distinctive sub-genre within Indian Fiction in English" (Prasad 216).

The present paper aims at finding the aspects of Western existential philosophy and Indian scriptures in the novels of Arun Joshi. Arun Joshi is one such writer who has tried to display the existential problems of the modern man. He digs deep into the inner recesses of his characters who are always in the quest for their identity and search for the true meaning of the life. His characters feel alienated, detached and rootless. Joshi was influenced by Western existential philosophers like Sartre and Camus as well as the impact of the teaching of the *Gita*, *Upanishads* and Gandhian philosophy can be traced in his novels. In this manner, Joshi presents the fusion of both the philosophical traditions in his novels and finds ultimate solutions for the complex problems of life in the Karma philosophy of the *Gita* which provides an affirmative realization of the true 'self' and the purpose of life. Joshi has written five novels namely *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and*



The River (1990). All these novels showcase individual's quest for a better meaning of life and present the juxtaposition of characters' inner psyche and the society they belong. *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and *The Apprentice* represent three ways of redemption as preached in the *Bhagavad-Gita*: the *Karmayoga*, the *Jnanayoga* and the *Bhaktiyoga* respectively. As O.P. Bhatnagar has appropriately noticed that, "A certain awareness of man's rootlessness and consequential loneliness and anxiety is the keynote of Arun Joshi's unique vision of contemporary Indo-English Fiction" (Bhatnagar 49).

Existentialism as a philosophical movement emerged in the mid-19th and 20th century in the western philosophy. It paid attention to the subjective human and the problems of his life. It was against the earlier philosophical tradition in which the importance was given to the ideas and reason but not to the subjective feelings of human being. As Walter Kaufmann appropriately puts it as, "Existentialism is not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against the traditional philosophy" (Kaufmann 11). The philosophers in this movement can be classified as theistic and atheistic. This movement was started by Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche who can be considered the founding fathers of it. But later on, in the mid-20th century philosophers like Heidegger, Sartre, Camus and Simon de Beauvoir have contributed a lot through their literary as well as philosophical writings.

The first and foremost characteristic is that existentialism begins from man rather than from nature. This philosophy treats man as an existent rather than man as thinking subject. The prominent base of it is in the famous dictum "Existence precedes essence" given by Sartre. As Sartre explains it, "We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterwards.... he will be what he makes of himself." (Macquarrie 15). The basic concepts of it are freedom of choice, responsibility, alienation, despair, death and identity crisis.

Though Indian philosophy does not think about existentialism directly still mention of the problems of the 'self' and meaning of the existence has been dealt in detail in it. Philosophy in India has always been considered as *Darshana* (vision) rather than an intellectual quest for truth. *Vedas* and *Upanishads* are the oldest literary monuments of the Aryan Mind that are true embodiments of individual's curiosity to explore the world around him. The gist lying beyond *Upanishads*' philosophy is that individuality is 'true self' and its realization leads to the absolute truth or the supreme bliss. The purpose of human life is to know this absolute reality and thus to attain salvation. But due to *Avidya or Maya* (Ignorance or Illusion) the individual keeps on engaging himself in sensuous pleasures and worldly attachments ignoring his true self and consequently, he takes birth and dies again and again carrying an inauthentic life. S. Radhakrishnan has rightly marked out that, "To get the existential experience of the self, we should get free from the diversity of objects, external and internal, which impedes and prevents the direct or intuitive vision of the essence of the self" (Radhakrishnan 57).

Three important features of modern existentialist philosophy are despair, death and freedom which have also been discussed in Indian philosophy. Despair is echoed in suffering which is the result of individual's own actions and the world has not been interpreted as alien reality but a sum total of individual's own actions. Death is viewed as an interfering and senseless repetitions. Indian philosophy never places death as an act of freedom and escape but it means only a change of scene for the life of individual and the veiling of his memory. After recognizing the situation, death becomes a reminder to transcendence his limited existential situation to have an 'authentic' life. Freedom comes not as a philosophical problem in Indian philosophy. An individual is left to create and form his essence.



Manifestation of Western Existentialism and Indian Scriptures in Arun Joshi's Novels:

Arun Joshi's maiden novel *The Foreigner* describes the story of its protagonist Sindi Oberoi who feels alienated and rootless and always tries to keep himself detached from the action. The novel is described from Sindi's point of view and shows the experiences of him as a student of Mechanical Engineering in American University in Boston and later as an employee in the firm of Mr. Khemka, a wealthy industrialist in Delhi. After the first chapter which deals with the death of Babu Rao Khemka, the son of Mr. Khemka in car accident in Boston, the novelist puts the readers to speculate about the emotional impact of Babu's death upon Sindi and Babu's fiancé, June and the further events are described by flash-back technique.

Sindi presents himself as an uprooted young man living in the later half of the twentieth century who wants to arrive at some meaning of his life. He seems a foreigner to the world wherever he goes and at times even becomes a stranger to himself. An Indian origin, born and brought up in Kenya, Sindi receives his early education in London and goes to study engineering in America. His parents had died in an air crash in his infancy and their only reality for him is "a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs" (TF 12). This mutability of his background emphasises his alienation and his being foreigner from birth. He confesses, "My foreignness lay within me." (TF 55). He "is an alien everywhere physically as well as metaphorically" (Mukherjee 202-203). After his parents' death, his uncle rears him up. But his uncle also dies and his life becomes a purposeless existence to him. He says, "Somebody has begotten me without a purpose and so far, I had lived without a purpose" (TF 55).

This loss of personal history, culture and national identity makes him a detached observer of the whole drama of existence. Sindi believes that man is just a toy in the hands of time and life is full of agony and pain. He has relationships with different women like Anna, Kathy and June. Anna is a middle-aged woman of "thirty-five with dark hair and finely chiselled features" (TF 176). She is "a minor artist who had separated from her husband" (TF 142). Sindi comes to know that she is yearning for her lost youth and fails to continue his relationship for more than six months. Later on, he gets involved with Kathy and enjoys sex with her but she also leaves him because she is a married woman and thinks that "marriage was sacred and had to be maintained at all costs" (TF 144). Then he comes into contact with June Blyth who lives with her mother at Boston. June is beautiful, sensual, benign, affectionate girl who meets Sindi at a foreign students' party. June loves Sindi deeply but this love is not sincerely reciprocated by Sindi. He, on the other hand, is confused and afraid of human relationships, because they eventually give pain and suffering.

On the basis of his past experiences, he chooses himself to remain detached as much as he can. he admits, "I don't want to get involved" (TF 62). He goes on talking and behaving disinterestedly with June and June's efforts to involve Sindi in a loving union fail due to his ego which forces him to practise detachment. He says, "One should be able to detach oneself from the object of one's love" (TF 55). June even wants to marry him but he denies because he does not want to possess her. So, June falls in love with Babu Rao Khemka who is an Indian student and a friend of Sindi. Babu and June develop a deep relationship and they want to marry. But when Babu comes to know about the relationship of Sindi and June, he is not able to bear with it and dies in a car accident. The death of Babu affects the lives of Sindi and June in a great manner. Later on, when Sindi wants to meet and communicate with June, he goes to June's home. But he finds about the death of June. He is so much depressed and realises that, "Detachment at that time had meant inaction. Now I had begun to see fallacy in it. Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it" (TF 55). Now, he decides to go to India to his ancestors' land by a flip of a coin. He meets Mr. Khemka and Sheila and joins their firm. Sheila, a sister of Babu, tries to interrogate Sindi about the death of her brother. But, here also, Sindi tries to keep himself away from such matters.

At last, when Sindi finds Mr. Khemka responsible for making wrong in financial matters and when income tax department punishes him, Sindi decides to leave the firm. It is here, he comes to know the true meaning of detachment from Muthu, a labourer in Mr. Khemka's firm that real detachment is not an inaction



but involving one's self in right action. Sindi applies it at the end and decides to re-join Mr. Khemka's firm for the benefit of such labourers. Thus, Sindi's Journey from the West to the East has become real path for his liberation from the misconceptions regarding practising detachment.

As *The Foreigner* deals with the liberation through proper action, Joshi's second novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* indicates about liberation through knowledge. The novel revolves around the crisis of self, agony and search for the affirmation in life. It is concerned with the mysterious inner world of man. It is a story of Billy Biswas who yearns for the primitive life narrated by Romesh Sahai (Romi) who is Billy's friend whom he has met as a student in New York. The novel begins with depicting Billy as a man of intellect, profound sensibility and usual obsessions. The son of a judge of a Supreme Court of India, Billy belongs to a rich and respectable family. His father sends him to America to take up engineering courses but he starts doing Ph.D. in Anthropology out of his keen interest in learning about the tribal attitudes and customs. He becomes aware about his identity and asks such questions as, "Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I am going?" (*TSCBB* 122). He is extraordinarily sensitive. Unlike Sindi, he listens to the voice of his soul. He chooses to live in Harlem, the black ghetto of America, being "one of the worse slums of New York City" (*TSCBB* 9). It is "the most human place he could find" (*TSCBB* 9).

Romi comes into contact with Billy while searching for accommodation in New York. They share a flat and develop a friendship which lasts till end. The initial part of the novel provides glimpses into Billy's strangeness as a man and also of his liking for primitive and unsophisticated people. Billy presents his motive as, "All I want to do in life is to visit the places they describe, meet the people who live there, find out about the aboriginalness of the world" (*TSCBB* 10). He talks to Rumi about the other side i.e., the primitive life untouched by sophistication that, "Most of us are aware only of the side on which we are born, but there is always the other side, the valley beyond the hills, the hills beyond the valley" (*TSCBB* 14-15). Tuula Lindgren, the Swedish lady of thirty years, who has come to United States for advanced training in psychiatric course, understands Billy's dilemma of life fully and knows what goes in his "dark, inscrutable, unsmiling eyes" (*TSCBB* 15). She tells Romi that Billy is an extraordinary person and feels inside him a strange force. She finds him "obsessed with a latent quest" (*TSCBB* 176). Billy is not in harmony with his family members. Although he lives with them, he is all alone, isolated and alienated, a stranger in the real sense of the term. He writes to Tuula Lindgren: "It seems, my dear Tuula, that we are swiftly losing what is known as one's grip on life. Why else this constant blurring of reality? Who am I? Who are my parents? My wife? My child? At times I look at them sitting at the dinner table, and for a passing moment, I cannot decide who they are or what accident of Creation has brought us together" (*TSCBB* 97). Billy's awareness of the deeper layers of his personality makes him an existentialist being, estranged and alienated from the superficial reality of life.

Romi has much affection for Billy, and discovers that "Billy had almost inhumanly sharp eyes" (*TSCBB* 43). He is almost distracted by "the look on his face. His expression was a mixture of nearly all those emotions that one tends to associate with a great predicament" (*TSCBB* 43-44). Billy's predicament becomes a strange case as he turns out to be a split personality between "primitive" and "civilized". Billy finds modern civilization fast degenerating as well as normless and meaningless. Whenever he listens to folk music or drum-beating, he feels altogether transported to the world of the primitive which is different from that of the so-called civilized society. Like Sindi, he does not feel at ease in American society: "White America, he said, was much too civilized for him" (*TSCBB* 9). During long walks with Billy, Romi finds his talks "revealing not only the mind of the speaker but also the dark unknowable layers of the mysterious world that surrounded us" (*TSCBB* 26). Later, he comes to know from Billy that how often he had hallucinations, "the same odd feeling of being in a place other than where I was, in a place very, very old, at times a wilderness, at other times full of strange primitive people" (*TSCBB* 180).

He returns to India and is appointed Professor in Anthropology at the Delhi University. His mother introduces him to Meena, a pretty young daughter of a retired civil servant. As he is much upset by



hallucinations, he marries Meena Chatterji and it is, as he thinks, like taking out “an insurance” on “his normalcy” (*TSCBB* 182). He wants to behave like a normal man. He wants to develop a sense of harmony with the surrounding, a sense of belonging. But this he does not get even after his marriage with Meena. She fails to engage his soul, to satisfy his inner urge rather she adds into his disillusionment and depression.

The imagery of dogs with large teeth and furred paws shows Billy’s utter dislike for the elite class. He is happy living with the primitive people who live closer to the ways of nature. He realizes that Meena is a product of “phony society” (*TSCBB* 185) and she fails to quench his thirst, to satisfy his soul. The distance between the two increases gradually and it generates a communication gap. Billy deserts his responsibilities towards his family, his wife and his son and believes that, “I had greater responsibilities towards my soul” (*TSCBB* 186). In order to get the right kind of solace that his injured soul needs, he meets Rima Kaul, who has been loving him passionately since the day she met him. His trips to Bombay take him closer to her. He feels she has a “rare degree of empathy” and “sufficient idea of human suffering” which Meena lacks. His passions lead him astray and he seduces her “like any common rogue” (*TSCBB* 188). But very soon he realizes that his relationship with Rima is nothing but his degradation.

Once he gets an opportunity to take his students on an anthropological expedition to the Satpura Hills in Madhya Pradesh and gets so much fascinated by the intense beauty of the hills and their inhabitants, particularly women with graceful figures and bright eyes that he disappears into the saal forests of the Maikala Hills. With the Bhils and their leader Dhunia, he eats, drinks and waits for the rising of the moon and “he could for the first time see clearly the change entering him. Bilasia, Billy understands, is the right woman to satisfy his soul. While he sat in the purple shadows, he had the first terrible premonition that he might not go back” (*TSCBB* 137). An enormous search is launched by the police to find Billy out. When they fail to find him out, it is presumed that he has been killed by a tiger prowling in the area. This “search” (*TSCBB* 177) for meaning is the doomed existentialist’s search that ultimately drives the protagonist to the doors of death, the final tragedy.

Thus, the novel stands as a bitter commentary on the tyranny of the forces of phoney civilization that crushes man’s desire for self-existence and kinship with nature.

The Apprentice presents the way of liberation through devotion. Joshi displays the materialistic aspects of contemporary world and its impact on modern man for various reasons in this novel. Ratan Rathor is the protagonist of the novel who feels conflicts between two philosophies- the “life” and the “living”. The theme of the novel clearly reflects the modern scenario of the Indian state. Joshi has used the technique of dramatic monologue. According to Tapan Gosh, “Crisis in the soul of an individual, who is entangled in the mess of contemporary life with its confusion of values and moral anarchy and his untiring quest for a remedy lie at the core of Arun Joshi’s exploration of human reality in *The Apprentice*” (Qtd. Bhavani 640). The novel is a confession of Ratan, the protagonist, a child of double inheritance who is born in pre-independent India. On one hand he is strongly influenced by his father who is killed in the revolution for Independence. His father’s idealism teaches him to be a devotee for his country and his fellow people. His father remarks pursuing career for personal profits is like “Bourgeois filth” (*TA* 32). He remembers his father’s words, “whatever, you do touches someone somewhere” (*TA* 143). On the other hand, his mother instructs him, “It was not patriotism but money, she said, that brought respect and bought security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws, she said, but money was law unto itself. (*TA* 19). Due to contrary ideals, he becomes a man of double personality which leads him to the crisis. Consequently, his words don’t match with his actions and he feels self-alienated from self as well as his surroundings.

Ratan Rathor being an unsophisticated youth, jobless arrives to Delhi in search of a career. He desires to earn a name and prosperous future by following his father’s idealism. Ratan remarks that, “And I had no doubt that... I should make a mark on the world, a mark as visible and striking as my father’s” (*TA* 23). He witnesses the fall of the nation and degradation of moralities. Corrupt and materialistic society tested



his ethics and ideals at each and every step. In order to sustain his professional growth, he sacrifices patriotism and honour. Attracted by materialistic values, he has risked the lives of innocent people by accepting bribe from Himmat Singh to clear an arms consignment for the Ind-China war. He undergoes a profound change and realizes that, "I had added a new dimension to my life. I had become, at the age of twenty-one, a hypocrite and a liar; in short, a sham.... From morning till night, I told more lies than truths. I had become a master faker.... a faker soon forgets who he really is That is when all starts to crumble. (TA 27).

Ratan continues lying and deceiving going in the wrong path. He feels helpless because he is forced to proceed. He expresses the power and enchantment of money like this: ". . . I did not need the money. I am quite sure of that. I needed it no more than sitting here, after two cups of tea, I need a third. I may drink it because others do, or because it is offered free, but I need it neither for survival nor happiness" (TA 58). By the death of his close friend the Brigadier, he understands that he is living without life. Rathor's immorality acts directly affected his friend's life and disturbed him mentally and led to his death by committing suicide. This incident makes feel ashamed of himself and guilty for the death of the Brigadier. Despite his wealth and material comforts, he lacks satisfaction at heart.

Ratan seeks repentance for his great betrayal of killing his friend by making confession. His self-destructive decision and moral ambivalence made him fraud and commit sin against the society. In order to achieve redemption for his guilt of accepting bribe and becoming responsible for his friend's death, he chooses Gandhian way by cleaning the shoes of the devotees every morning at a temple. It is a kind of *Bhakti* (Devotion) in which he offers his service as a way of repentance. The words of Himmat Singh help Ratan to stick his moral conscience and to redeem himself from the sin. Thus, he realizes that one cannot blame others for one's mistake and one cannot reform the world, but oneself. Further he keeps on reminding of being good and being some use to others.

Thus, this novel attacks on the materialistic values as defective materials which make modern man to fulfil their selfish needs. Joshi presents the scenario of the modern society where people adopt favourable ends. Ratan's character shows how people become selfish to achieve their needs in any manner. Joshi very aptly describes materialistic attitude of the modern man which creates degeneration of moral values and deceitfulness as well as meaninglessness.

Conclusion:

To sum up, Joshi's protagonists are always in their existential search for the true meaning of life. They make choice to be alienated and not to get involved. They come into contact with different women but ultimately realize the futility of the relationships. They acquire redemption through different ways. Sindi finds a true meaning of detachment in action. Sindi resembles Karna, the great character in *The Mahabharata* because both face a crisis of identity. His life can also be viewed as *Yatra*, a pilgrimage from meaninglessness to affirmation through knowledge of life. He after undergoing a long conflict between the saint and the lusty beast in him, reaches a solution to his problem. Billy's case is strange. He gets liberation through the knowledge of the tribal people and ends up there. Though the novel runs along existential lines, it strives to assert much needed values. It speaks of spiritual realisation in contrast to mundane entanglements. The novel deviates slightly from *The Stranger* in the end as Sindi finds his meaning in the civilized world itself and learns to live like a *Karmayogi* whereas Billy derives his meaning only after renouncing his city life joining the primitive world for pure and righteous living. Ratan Rathor feels guilty of the corruption and finds his way through devotion. The way he chooses for the purification of his soul meets the vision of *Bhakti* (devotion) in *The Bhagavad-Gita*. He undergoes expiation and believes that purification is to be obtained not by any ritual or dogma but by making amends. His earlier aesthetic attitude towards life is gone



and he comes to believe that only God can help him. Thus, Joshi finely balances the ways of both Western existential and Indian scriptures in his novels and provides an affirmative solution to the complex problems of life.

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