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Existential Vision in the Novels of Arun Joshi

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Abstract

Existentialism is one of the prevalent philosophies of the twenty-first century. It emphasizes the existence, freedom, and choice of the individual. Despite living in an irrational world, humans define themselves as rational decision-makers, according to one viewpoint. The world as a whole is preoccupied with human existence and is firmly convinced that there is no meaning to life. The philosophy holds that there is no God or transcendent force that creates or gives life meaning. One must instead confront life alone, adhering to one's very existence. Existential enigma is present in Arun Joshi's protagonists to the extent that they are in a predicament in his novels. Without universal, objective standards, individuals must choose their own path, according to Kierkegaard. Additionally, Friedrich Nietzsche argued that the individual must determine which situations are moral. Thus, the majority of Existentialists believe that personal experience and acting on one's own convictions are necessary for discovering the truth, and that the comprehension of a situation by a participant is preferable to that of a detached, objective observer. Consequently, the protagonists of Arun Joshi, in accordance with Kierkegaard's philosophy, choose their own method of understanding over universal standards, deriving their own convictions and arriving at their own existential conundrum through life experiences.

Key Words: Existence, Freedom, Choice, Existentialism, Rational

Introduction:

Existentialism is derived from the root word Existence, with the adjective form 'existential' and the suffix -ism added to evolve the theory of Existentialism. The word has equivalents in numerous languages, including 'existence' in French, 'existenz' in German, 'existensia' in Latin, and 'asti' in Sanskrit. Existence or the state of existing is the root meaning of each of the words. Humans are by nature miserable and, as a result, appear to exist rather than live joyfully. Many novelists have chosen to examine the same aspect of human nature as a narrative or theme in their works. Man has an insatiable desire for freedom and options, despite the fact that he rarely has all of his choices fulfilled.

Existentialism is one of the prevalent philosophies of the twenty-first century. It emphasizes the existence, freedom, and choice of the individual. Despite living in an irrational world, humans define themselves as rational decision-makers, according to one viewpoint. The world as a whole is preoccupied



with human existence and is firmly convinced that there is no meaning to life. The philosophy holds that there is no God or transcendent force that creates or gives life meaning. One must instead confront life alone, adhering to one's very existence. Therefore, the word itself defies definition. Numerous philosophers have been unable to agree on its definition.

Philosophers' Views on Existentialism:

Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) was one of the first existentialist philosophers who believed that theistic existentialism always opposed Sartre's existentialism of the isolated self, the death of deity, and the experience of living. Marcel led an intellectual existence as a literary critic, playwright, and concert pianist. Many existentialists believed that life consists solely of living and accepting all of its consequences, and that relationships with others are meaningless. Marcel propagated in his philosophy that his work was distinguished by a focus on the concrete and on lived experiences. Following his conversion to Catholicism in 1929, he opposed atheistic existentialism, particularly that of Jean-Paul Sartre. Nevertheless, Marcel was deeply dismayed by Sartre's description of the isolated self, the death of God, and the experience of a life with 'no exit'. Regardless of his starting point, Marcel reverted throughout his life to the description of his philosophy as 'Theistic Existentialism'. Even though theism was consistent with his existentialism, he argued that it was not a necessary component of it.

René Descartes, in contrast, asserted that consciousness dominates humans, whereas existentialists believe that the human is transferred into a world where consciousness precedes existence. As stated by Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Man is nothing at first'. Existence precedes essence, contrary to the traditional philosophy that Sartre subsequently acknowledged.

Soren Kierkegaard is considered to have been the first philosopher to attempt to articulate existentialism, albeit with a distinct nomenclature and perspective. He proposed that every person should strive to add more significance to life through his thoughts, actions, and by being a passionate, sincere, and genuine individual. Existentialism is a descriptive term for the state of being or existing. However, according to philosophers, the term 'Existential' refers to an action that transcends mundane existence. Therefore, existence represents to act in reality. To act is to make a decision, and to make a decision is to construct values.



Existentialism appeared atheistic, theistic, or agnostic according to various philosophers' interpretations. Existentialist Nietzsche proclaimed that "God is dead" and that the concept of God is obsolete, whereas Kierkegaard and others were profoundly religious despite their inability to justify it. In a sense, existentialists desired the freedom to believe or not believe.

Arun Joshi's Vision of Existentialism:

Through his novels, Arun Joshi attempts to investigate the theme of existentialism and to highlight the element of his protagonists suffering from alienation and challenging their very identity. Joshi brushes on existentialism and illustrates it through his extremely enlightened protagonists' dilemmas and self-reflections. The protagonists of Joshi's novels appear to present a soliloquy of sorts as they seek for the meaning of life. Even though his protagonists are highly educated and enlightened, they all appear to be at a crossroads and in pursuit of life's meaning.

The Stranger is Arun Joshi's debut novel. Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist of the novel, is a modern man with a Ph.D. who suffers from contemporary alienation. O.P. Bhatnagar says, "A strange feeling of aloneness and aloofness..... permeates the entire narrative and provides the necessary texture and structure to the novel" (11).

In *The Stranger*, Sindi appears to be lost in his existential predicament due to his misplaced and displaced state of being. As he moves from place to place, he continually laments his previous residence. Geographic alienation is a problem for him. He believes that wherever he travels, he will not find stability. As his journey leads him from Kenya to England, America, and ultimately India, he experiences a constant sense of uprooting. Sindi, whose parents perished in an aircraft accident and who was raised by his uncle in Kenya, moves to England for advanced education and then to the United States for work. Consequently, he feels like he belongs nowhere. Thus, he experiences a malaise of rootlessness, an aspect of existentialism. In addition, his uncle's death exacerbates his lack of ties, as he considers Kenya to be his birthplace and now even that is gone. Sindi reaches a crossroads in his life when his last hope of parental relationship is dashed. Thus, he is denied any familial affection or paternal care, as well as the care of anyone else who could play a parental role. He lacks both roots and affection. Such circumstances are undoubtedly taxing on a person with a divided personality. People who are bereaved at a young age tend to develop a sense of drifting or detachment. Sindi, who has been to England, does not feel at home there and always feels like a visitor. He



feels like a foreigner in an alien land.

He gets into a relationship with June Blyth in Boston, who quickly identifies his problem of detachment and suggests that he should have a family of his own. June even remarks that,

There is something strange about you, you know. Something distant. I'd guess that when people are with you they don't feel like they're with a human being. Maybe it's an Indian characteristic, but I have a feeling you'd be a foreigner anywhere! (The Foreigner 29).

Even though he feels estranged from the entire world, Sindi conducts himself as a human and displays the same behaviour when assisting Babu Khemka and the other employees in Mr. Khemka's office. Sindi denies unequivocally the advice of a psychiatrist to have a relationship with a woman because his experiences with Anna and Kathy are still vivid in his mind. Sindi is convinced that all love is a delusion, and he believes that his relationship with June is also an illusion. He therefore rejects June's marriage proposition by presenting June with a photograph of a stereotyped human.

In the subsequent novel, in contrast to Sindi, the protagonist of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* becomes estranged from society and the modern world. Billy, who was born into a Hindu family in Banaras, seeks his identity among tribals by isolating himself from the present world. The novel begins with Billy's acquaintance Romi recalling Billy's peculiar case. Although Billy's ancestor was the Prime Minister of the renowned princely state of Orissa, he does not appear to have inherited the family tradition of being a monarch. While Billy's father practiced law in Delhi and was an Ambassador to a European country during Billy's adolescence, Billy does not appear to have inherited any of his father's prestigious qualities or social standing.

Billy is an immigrant in a foreign country like Sindi, but unlike Sindi, he resides with his parents and does not feel incorporated with them. His relationship with his parents is strained. Billy chooses to pursue a Ph.D. in Anthropology despite his father's desire for him to pursue a career in engineering. Billy listens to his emotions and follows his passion. Billy's expertise in Anthropology pertinent to Indian cultures sustains Tuula's interest in the subject and even entertains her with his enthusiasm for it. As Billy is currently pursuing a Ph.D. and working as an educator, he continually updates his knowledge of Indian tribes and stays current on their culture. At objectives, his passion and profession converge, and he cannot be stopped



from achieving his objective.

Billy has the inner strength to embrace tribal life because he feels out of place in the modern world. Occasionally, when he hears a forceful voice from within, he even exhibits odd behaviour. In New York, Romi is able to view Billy's various aspects. A year later, Romi receives a dispatch informing him of his father's untimely passing and returns to India.

Upon arriving in India, Romi attempts to adapt to the local culture and, per his uncle's advice, prepares for and passes the Civil Services examination. As district collector, he is stationed in a secluded village. On the departure of Romi, his closest companion, Billy's heart urges him to return to India, which is less developed than the United States and to which he could easily adapt. However, upon his return to India, Billy feels extremely uncomfortable adjusting to his family's new situations. He gets into conflict with his father for disregarding Engineering in favour of Anthropology. He gains control of the circumstance by gaining employment as an anthropology professor at Delhi University.

Billy now encounters two different worlds on a daily basis: the world of his choice at the university, where he teaches Anthropology and enjoys his lectures on Indian Tribes, and the world of his family, where he struggles to manage modern people with modern ideas. Billy fails to achieve equilibrium between the two contradictory realms. He rarely communicates with his family because his mind is preoccupied with primordial world elements that are in no way compatible with his home. Thus, he is unable to adapt to his family because his mind is constantly preoccupied with thoughts of the prehistoric world. Billy does not always comprehend what he is doing. He constantly feels as if an unknown force is propelling him from within, but he is unaware of it. Billy whenever he goes out on an educational tour, he feels suffocated as if he is a fish out of water on his return home. He sees everyone as aliens. His words,

I see a roomful of finely dressed men and women seated on downy sofas and while I am looking at them under my very nose, they turn into a kennel of dogs yawning or struggling against each other holding whisky glasses in their furred paws! (The Strange Case 96).

These words disclose his contempt for the contemporary world. Billy's emotive investment in Indian communities hinders his ability to interact with the modern world that surrounds him. Over time, Billy's mind is on the verge of bearing fruit as a result of a peculiar yet genuine emotional crisis.



In fact, Billy's crisis is incomprehensible to the surrounding society. In fact, they cannot even conceive of it. Consequently, nobody in his family can perceive his estrangement. However, his behaviour suggests that he has reached marriageable age, and his parents conclude that he should be married. However, Billy adheres to his own idiosyncrasies and preferences that have been developing since his youth. He loathes money and therefore loathes a world cantered solely on money. He wonders-

I sometime wonder whether civilization is anything more than making and spending of money. What else does the civilized man do? And if there are those who are not busy earning and spending - the so-called thinkers and philosophers and men like that - they are merely hired to find solution, through light, as they say, on complications caused by this making and spending of money. (The Strange Case 69)

In the midst of his conflicting emotions, he consents to marry Meena Chatterjee, a girl from an aristocratic family who is highly westernized. Billy makes a hurried decision to avoid his hallucinations, which make him contemptuous and upset him to his core. However, within the first year of his marriage, he realizes he has made a grave error. While Meena is from a modern society, Billy comes from a wealthy family; it appears that his desire for a primordial world is drawing him away from the monotony of life. In fact, in the outset of any new family life, understanding one another is the most essential factor. Moreover, the elders must instruct the couple on how to comprehend one another. However, Billy's case is challenging and peculiar due to his alienation and the resulting existentialist conundrum. None can satisfy Billy's desire for his existence. Thus, the couple appears to have found themselves in the contemporary dilemma of an incompatible marriage.

Billy's predicament necessitates a high level of sympathy from his wife in order to appease him. Meena's emotional quotient lacks brilliance despite her extensive education. Meena simply believes this. Billy is becoming increasingly bizarre with each passing day (p.54). Nevertheless, Billy's outlook on life becomes more cynical. His heart's pleading compels him to seek out someone who can understand him. In his quest, he discovers Rima Kaul, one of his Bombay-based relatives. He makes additional journeys to Bombay in order to satisfy his desire for a spiritual spouse who can closely comprehend and empathize with him. Rima is captivated by Billy and has an affair with him for some time.



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Therefore, Billy has the opportunity to seduce her in a hotel. Billy soon discovers his error, realizing that his emotions yearned for something but he was seeking elsewhere. Billy was compelled to apologize for his inappropriate behaviour. Billy begins to feel estranged not only from his wife and family, but also from himself, as his sense of remorse swells. His infatuation with Rima ignites his search for his true soul companion, a tribal girl who frequently appears in his dreams. Billy is extremely ashamed of his fatal error. Although Billy did not intend to seduce Rima, his never-ending search for his soul mate fails at that point. Realizing that Rima is not the one he has been searching for, he endeavours to find his true soul mate. However, by then the error had already occurred. The entire encounter left Billy with a tremendous sense of remorse and humiliation. In one of his conversations with Romi, Billy admits that his relationship with Rima was a failure. The alienation he experienced places him in an existential conundrum that continues to torment and plague him. Billy's efforts to cleanly escape the tangle intensify, but to no avail. His desire to belong to a primordial society grows stronger. He feels more alienated from the civilized world. After the Rima Kaul episode, he also believes that his heart is exacting revenge on him for ignoring its yearning to belong to the primordial world. The only option left to him is to flee from reality into a delusion, a place devoid of the grime of materialistic, corrupt, and disheartening people. Billy is crippled by his yearning and a sense of despair, despite the fact that his alienation is self-inflicted.

In his next novel, *The Apprentice*, Arun Joshi depicts how a man's demoralization is the result of a bureaucratic society. The protagonist of *The Apprentice*, Ratan Rathor, becomes estranged from doing good and falls victim to the corrupt society. Ratan is a dazzling example of how a money-obsessed bureaucratic society drives man to pursue money at the expense of all inherited values. In addition, the novel depicts a society riven by hypocrisy, corruption, womanizing, intoxication, and deceit.

Ratan Rathor is an officer in a war materials office, having risen from the position of scribe. His inheritance comes from both his father and mother. His father is a martyr who continues to fight for the nation's freedom, while his mother is a pragmatist who believes that money can create many things and is the most important thing. Ratan viewed his father as his idol throughout his boyhood and aspired to follow in his footsteps. Ratan struggles between his father's patriotism and his mother's cosmopolitan wisdom. Consequently, he has been divided between two philosophies since infancy.



However, after the demise of his father and the responsibility of caring for his ailing mother in a modest home, he changes his mind. Ratan realizes that his father mismanaged his life upon his passing. Ratan is gradually influenced by his mother's words of wisdom; he recognizes the unvarnished truth that money governs and also governs. Ratan finishes his education with the help of the Brigadier's friend. However, he regrets not being able to pursue his goal of becoming a doctor due to his financial circumstances. He conveys, "If I had the money then, I would have become a doctor. If I had only the money to exist for five more years" (The Apprentice 18).

Ratan endures humiliation, anguish, and interminable anxiety in his pursuit of a living. However, all of his attempts to find a job to support himself result in unending humiliation, starvation, and even rage. Days pass with no sign of an employment, causing Ratan to become frustrated. To avoid embarrassment, he ceases to interact with his companions and other people. He separates himself to the point of self-alienation. Ratan is rendered forlorn, impotent, and even apathetic by his lack of employment despite his education. Ratan becomes anxious to establish himself in order to earn his own respect. He attributes his misfortune to the system, bureaucracy, and bourgeois corruption in the society. Ratan realizes that the immediate need is not nationalism or patriotism, but rather a fundamental job to support himself and care for his mother. In such circumstances, a person loses faith in the system because nothing seems to appease him. Ratan is devastated without an employment. He decides to do anything to obtain one. As long as Ratan remains unemployed, he believes he is alienated from society.

Ratan travels to Delhi, the metropolis of optimism, in quest of employment and to establish his worth. Existence becomes a major problem for him. Momentarily, it appeared unlikely that he would survive. Nevertheless, he attempts to swim against all obstacles to survive and establish that he is the finest. Here, Ratan appears to be fighting for his life. He appears to be experiencing an existential dilemma.

He obtains a clerical position in the war material supply organization with the aid of one of his roommates: a turner, two siblings from Mirzapur, a goldsmith's assistant, and a stenographer from Saharanpur. Ratan does not wish to reflect back on his life because he has endured the worst conditions and the suffering of destitution. He hopes to secure his future in his new position. Ratan begins his first apprenticeship in the office, disregarding his companions and attending to his work promptly in order to gain the favor of his supervisor. His initial training consisted of administering treachery, deception, bribery,



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and even disloyalty. Ratan begins to alienate his pals as he fights for his job survival.

However, Ratan's true colors emerge when he has the opportunity to advance his career by marrying his boss' niece. Ratan appears to have won the battle of existence and feels victorious after marrying the woman and being promoted. Now that Ratan has learned from his mother the value of money, he appears to be teaching his mother a lesson by resolving the alliance with his boss's niece. Then, for the sake of formality, he brings his mother to complete the marriage proposal. Ratan learns from Himmat Singh the importance of Justice the hard way:

You believe there is justice in the world. You go about the world for fifty years, this belief setting in your heart. Then something happens and you go seeking justice. And justice is just not there. Or you assume your wife is faithful, your children love you, your boss is fair, or that God exists. And then, someday proof comes along that nothing is so. This is what hurts. (The Apprentice 23).

Ratan adapts to the methods of society, in contrast to Billy, who abandons it. He is estranged from values such as integrity, honour, patriotism, truthfulness, etc. He begins to make agreements in order to amass wealth, and he is convinced that the world operates on transactions. He begins to identify with his employer and his methods for earning money and gaining social standing. Ratan believes that if the supervisor can do it and always be correct, so can he. Ratan is oblivious to the fact that two wrongs can never equal a right. However, the way of the world is to be unjust and remain prosperous.

In the name of survival, Ratan decides to unconditionally obey his supervisor. However, he regrets his decision because he believes he has had to lick their feet and grin for their enjoyment the entire time. Ratan continues to act in the same manner, going so far as to plot against a young officer, resulting in the officer's transfer and Ratan's promotion to officer. Ratan views his promotion as an honour conferred upon him in recognition of his credibility and education, rather than as a result of his conspiracy. He even believes that his co-workers lack such efficacy.

I had certain qualities, skills rather that were not to be found among clerks... I also... worked hard, harder than almost anybody in the department except the superintendent himself. In fact, I could not rest until job assigned to me was completed. (The Apprentice 35)



From that point on, Ratan accepts bribes from everyone without hesitation. Ratan accepts a bribe in order to transfer defective military equipment to the government, which then purchases it for the country. Ratan is unaware of the consequences of his actions at that time. Ratan causes his close brigadier companion to lose the conflict by procuring defective military equipment. During an investigation, Ratan does not attempt to admit his error; rather, he criticizes the system for being incapable of interrogating an officer like himself.

Ratan escapes from police detention due to Himmat Singh's intervention and bribery of the police station's superintendent. Ratan is unwilling to reveal the truth. Consequently, the brigadier is court-martialled. Only then does Ratan comprehend the gravity of his error and begin to feel regretful. The consciousness of a Ratan awakens after a long dormancy. From that point forward, he is plagued by his own remorse and the belief that he was responsible for the murder of his close companion Brigadier. He feels embarrassed to meet his friend's wife. Ratan recognizes that he is different on the inside. Ratan recognizes that he is no longer naive, feels regret that he has become treacherous, and realizes that it is quite simple for him to betray anyone, including his closest companion.

Ratan loses all of his companions because no one shared his deepest emotions. His wife is not emotionally near to him after twenty years of marriage because he obtained her in a transaction. In addition, his closest companion has passed away, leaving Ratan all alone and suffocating in grief. As he is unable to discuss his remorse with anyone, his regret develops within him until he is overcome by it. Soon, Ratan will be unable to contain his remorse. As he cannot disclose the goods or share the information with anyone, he is left with no choice but to converse and communicate with himself alone. Arun Joshi correctly envisaged the novel's depiction as a dramatic monologue because Ratan loses all of his companions.

Ratan's alienation from contemporary society differs from Billy's. Ratan views himself as an outcast in contemporary society because he perceives treachery, deceit, and malice everywhere. In Ratan, a civil conflict begins with the righteous contending against the evil. Ratan cannot perish as his daughter reaches the age of marriageability, nor can he live with the remorse in his heart because he inherited his father's values, which constantly drive guilt into his heart. Ratan's predicament is that of a contemporary individual in the contemporary world. Incapable of reconciling the competing values.



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Conclusion:

Arun Joshi's protagonists are highly educated and enlightened members of society. However, they are afflicted by the materialistic aspect of life, which makes their lives wretched. Their tragic defects of alienation and existential philosophy render them enigmatic as a result of overthinking and inactivity. They are unhappy for the majority of the novel due to their outlooks on life. Billy is culturally alienated whereas Sindi Oberoi lives in alienation due to his deceptive detachment and ignorance. While Ratan's excessive ambition in life alienates him from himself, Som's lack of spirituality alienates him from his loved ones and himself. All of the protagonists in Arun Joshi's novels are highly educated. They are full of pride and carve out a niche for themselves as if they were monuments to pride, intelligence, and erudition, but they are utterly incapable of dealing with their own lives. They are intelligent, but lack the common man's common sense to exist in harmony with those around them. They constantly seek mental peace and tranquillity, which they lose horribly due to their own vanity and obstinacy. Until wisdom dawns, all of Arun Joshi's protagonists are immersed in existentialist phenomena in the labyrinths of life.



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