

EXISTENTIALISM IN MAJOR CHARACTERS OF ARUN JOSHI AND ANITA DESAI: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

*The potential meaninglessness of human existence has corroded human life from various quarters. The existential encounter with nothingness is typical of modern man's life. Its treatment by Indian writers like Joshi and Desai is no less interesting. Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* explores in depth the problems of Sindhi Oberoi. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* also delineates existential dimension. *The Apprentice* too portrays the plight of the contemporary man. *The Last Labyrinth* examines their inner world of an industrialist, Som Bhasker who is guided by undefined hungers. Maya, in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, leads the life of a pampered recluse. In *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* Desai dramatizes conflict between two opposed attitudes towards life. The conflict between the need to withdraw in order to preserve one's sanity and need to be involved in the painful process of life continues in *Fire and the Mountain*. The characters of Arun Joshi and Anita Desai are alienated and lonely; therefore they are existentialists, strangers and outsiders to their own land. They search out their own identity and always suffer from the guilt that they do not belong to a place or to a person and finally they are left to struggle for existence in their society.*

Keywords: modern man, existential, Arun Joshi....

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The twentieth century has been an age of great spiritual stress and strain. It has been regarded as “The Age of Alienation”. It is languishing in confusion, frustration, disintegration, disillusionment and meaninglessness. The potential meaninglessness of human existence has corroded human life from various quarters. The existential encounter with nothingness is typical of modern man’s life. The hiatus between what the individual aspires for and the hard reality of what he achieves, between what he professes and practices, and between what he really is and would like to appear has mercilessly crumbled his life leaving an insidious effect on his inner being. The injuries inflicted and the scars left on his psyche generate a cynical attitude towards the established social norms and values and makes him grope for life’s relevance. Man is shocked to find that he is no longer the master of his destiny and that there are forces which threaten to wither his life and all its joys and hopes. He comes to feel helpless in the sense that he cannot control what he is able to foresee. He suffers from a deep sense of powerlessness.

The most besetting problem that man faces today is the existential problem. In our age man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin but from inner problem—a conviction of isolation, randomness and meaninglessness in his way of existence. The existential problem is so pervasive that it threatens to corrode every sphere of life. It has been treated in considerable detail in American and European literature. Its treatment by Indian writers like Joshi and Desai is no less interesting. Two novelists of Indian English Literature, Arun Joshi and Anita Desai have earned wide acclaim. They are common in treatment of themes, existential aspects in particular. Both of them grapple with the moments of acute trying situations in human life. They explore the human predicament and the motives responsible for a man’s action on his psyche. They reveal the confrontation of man with his self and the question of his existence. Their search is directed to the mysterious region of human psyche. They delve deeper and deeper into the inner recesses to find instincts and impulse at work.

Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* explores in depth the problems of Sindhi Oberoi. "A strange feeling of aloneness and aloofness permeate the entire narrative and provides the necessary texture and structure of the novel." (Bhatnagar) Sindhi is always lonely and ill at ease in the world in which he has to live. He belongs to no country, no people and regards himself as "an uprooted young man living aimlessly in the latter half of the twentieth century". (*The Foreigner*, P. 195) This novel can be viewed as an attempt to plumb man's dilemma. It is about things that Sindhi wants- the courage to be and the capacity to love. His alienation is of the soul and not of Geography. Right from the beginning he is oppressed by a desire to find the meaning of life. He himself wants to do something meaningful. While gathering various experiences of life he is convinced of the temporariness of the things. He says: "Nothing seems real to me, leave me alone permanent. Nothing seems to be very important" (107). In his eagerness to find out the meaning of life, Sindhi lives in a strange world of intense pleasure and almost equally intense pain. But he fails to make a satisfactory progress as he himself tells us; his twenty five years are "largely wasted in search of wrong things at wrong places." (92) He does not fit in the world and his way of life becomes intolerable.

Arun Joshi's another novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* also delineates existential dimension. His "Billy like Sindhi is in search of a human world of emotional fullness- a world of meaningful relatedness." (Jasbir Jain, P. 54) Billy is aware of the deeper layers of his personality and feels totally alienated from the superficial reality of life. Renouncing his past, his family, and the everyday world he goes in search of the meaning in life. As a student in America he is more interested in books on anthropology and places described in them. He would like to learn with real interest and absorption about the aboriginals of the world, and it is around his interest in the primitive man that his entire life had been organized. On returning to India, he feels like a fish out of water and sees no other way out to fly from the civilized society. He makes the trip to tribal wilderness the vast emptiness of central India and vanishes into the Saal forests of Maikala Hills with an aim of leading a life of a tribal. Even before his physical disappearance into the jungles he ceased to belong to this world. He felt being impelled by a great force in this primitive tribal life that he finds his own fulfillment. He feels that he has "suddenly discovered that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than a poor reflection of million others." (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, P. 142) Efforts to bring Billy back to the civilization by police force lead to the final tragedy. He pays with his life for daring to step out of stifling confines of the urban civilization.

Joshi's *The Apprentice* too portrays the plight of the contemporary man. "Sailing about in a confused society without norms, without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose." (*The Apprentice*, P. 74) The protagonist Ratan Rathor, comes of an impoverished middle class family. He has to find his own way and pay his own price. He has been often told, "It is not patriotism but money that brings respect and security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws but money was a law to itself." (P 37) Ratan is in search of his purpose of life. But he takes almost a life time to free himself from the bondage of valueless urban civilization. He discovers that even religion is not free from corruption. He undergoes the most difficult penance. On his way to office, he wipes outside the temple the shoes of the congregation.

Another novel of Arun Joshi, *The Last Labyrinth* examines their inner world of an industrialist, Som Bhasker who is guided by undefined hungers. He moves between life and love, God and Death. He is regularly tormented by the hollowness within him. His inflictions plunge him into "a bottomless pit of despair, like a shipwrecked sailor sinking into the ocean". (*The Last Labyrinth*, P. 144) He tries to satisfy his ravaging desires by possession of an object, a business enterprise and a woman named Anuradha. However his desires get multiplied not only because of the terrible loneliness of his heart but also because of his awareness of the lack of relevance of life. As a student he was upset by the futile activities of life. Later he becomes even more convinced that life is full of complications-"a labyrinth within the labyrinths like the lanes of Benaras. Concluding his opinion about life he says, "Nothing was straightforward. One was always running a hurdle race". (P. 161)

Now let us focus our attention on some major characters of Anita Desai. Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock*, leads the life of a pampered recluse. She and her husband, Gautam live alone, and even he requires little interaction with his wife, Therefore, the major action takes place in Maya's mind one of them will die in the fourth year of their marriage is a statement which comes back to torment her. For months she lives in fear of her own death. As time passes she comes to reflect more and more intensely on the meaning of life. Instead of being content to live her remaining days to the fullest, she begins to demand more time. She assumes that Gautam has to die and she has to live. In the next novel, *Voices in the City*, that follows *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai continues the theme of the sordidness, the brutality and the sheer dreariness of the physical world. It are these things that her characters of the novel are revolting against. Nirode, Monisha and Amla make spiritual journeys from doubt, frustration and disillusionment they travel through suffering and stumble their way to solutions of their own. Their problems are not ordinary. They are not concerned with

simple problem of mere existence. Amla is a commercial artist. Nirode is leading a life of semi starvation but he is preoccupied with the essentials and Monish is married into a well-to-family. Earning their bread is never their problem. Nirode moves from one solution to another. He is obsessed with the desire to fail, because succumbing to the lure of success would be a compromise. He feels no difference between loving, hating, resisting and compromise. Monisha's death jolts him into a new relationship with life. When the city and his mother merge into a single symbol, he sees them both as Kali, the mother: "She is not merely good, she is not merely evil, she is good and she is evil, she is our knowledge and our ignorance. I know why I'm living, at last, I know where I'm going, towards her." (*Voices in the City*, P. 256)

In *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* Desai dramatizes conflict between two opposed attitudes towards life. The major protagonist Sita is nervous, sensitive middle aged woman who finds herself alienated from her husband and children because of explosive emotions. This conflict between the sensitive individual and the insensitive world is objectified in terms of a series of situations which convey the tension, the conflict and the withdrawal into its own protective shell. It is evident that the novelist does not project a one sided view of the human problems. A life of complete inwardness, of a neurotic subjective indulgence is not the solution of the problem of life. Nor is the other extreme of complete conformity and total draining out of the individuality the proper way out of the dilemma. In Sita's case life comes to her as a very trivial, full of disappointments and it comes as a tremendous depression to her. When she realizes what she has to live, she has to compromise. Her failure to achieve any kind of completeness is because her memories are related to a false world.

The conflict between the need to withdraw in order to preserve one's sanity and need to be involved in the painful process of life continues in *Fire and the Mountain*. This oscillation between attachment and detachment reflects the need for a meaning in life. Nanda Kaul has had submitted to the requirements of her husband's status and to his wishes. She suffered from "the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable access." (*Fire on the Mountain*, P. 30) In the midst of her busy life she tried to fortify an hour of stillness every day, but stillness eluded and she arrives at it through her forced isolation. She wants to be left alone.

The characters of Arun Joshi and Anita Desai are alienated and lonely; therefore they are existentialists, strangers and outsiders to their own land. They search out their own identity and always suffer from the guilt that they do not belong to a place or to a

person and finally they are left to struggle for existence in their society. With Arun Joshi and Anita Desai the Indian Novel makes departure and catches up with the modern western novel. The observation of the novelists shifts from outer world to the inner side. Viewed in totality, the works of Arun Joshi and Anita Desai occupy a unique place in Indian Fiction in English for their richness, depth and sophistication. Both have contributed to Indian Literature through their flowering genius.

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