

# Existential Quest in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the theme of existentialism in Arun Joshi's debut novel, *The Foreigner* (1968). Arun Joshi (1939-1993) was one of the most significant Indian literary voices in English. Throughout his literary oeuvre, Joshi has often explored existential problems. Instead of focusing on the social or political problems, he has focused on the complexities of a modern individual's existence. His protagonists are cynical, disillusioned and alienated beings struggling to make sense of their purpose in life. The novel depicts Surinder "Sindi" Oberoi's relentless quest for peace and self-realisation. He leads an alienated and rootless existence and tries his best to remain detached from the world around him. He is a quintessential "foreigner" who retains his foreignness wherever he goes. His constant drifting to find a purpose for his meaningless existence causes him despair and agony. Eventually, he comes to realise the fallacy of his warped worldview and learns the real meaning of detachment. The existential quest of his protagonist towards self-realisation is delineated with remarkable insight and maturity by Joshi. Joshi has also relied upon the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* to conclude that the path to salvation lies in participation and selfless action.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, alienation, detachment, ennui, frustration, rootlessness.

Arun Joshi was an Indian author writing in English. In a literary career spanning two decades, he wrote 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). He also published a collection of short stories titled *The Survivor* in 1975. Joshi was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for his penultimate novel, *The Last Labyrinth*, in 1982. Unlike his contemporary writers, he broke new ground in Indian English fiction by focusing on the human predicament. His works described the acute alienation and dilemmas the modern individual faces. Though not as famous as some of his contemporary writers, he emerged as one of the most prominent Indian writers in English during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Existentialism (or *Existenzphilosophie*) is a 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy centred on analysing existence and how humans find themselves existing in the world. Existentialism is the most well-known philosophical movement that has had considerable influence outside the purview of philosophy, including theology, drama, art, literature, and psychology. It became popular in Europe and America following the horrific years of World War II. The origins of existentialism can be traced back to the thinking of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), who is generally regarded as the "father of existentialism", and German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900). During the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, existential thought was greatly expanded upon by the German philosophers Karl Theodor Jaspers (1883-1969) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), whose primary concern was the problems of concrete, personal human existence and also the significance of death. Heidegger used the phrase *Da-Sein* ("being there" or "being in the world") to describe an existing human being. French philosopher Gabriel Marcel first coined the term existentialism in the 1940s and associated it with Jean-Paul Sartre, who initially rejected it. Sartre, who came to be identified as the hierophant of modern existentialism, would later adopt the existentialist label in a lecture to the Club Maintenant in Paris on October 29, 1945, published as *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (*Existentialism is a Humanism*). The short book popularised existential philosophy and served as its manifesto. The key themes identifiable with existential thought are alienation, anxiety, anguish, absurdity, individual freedom, choice, authenticity and inauthenticity. The present paper examines the existential quest of the protagonist in *The Foreigner* towards self-realisation.

Joshi's debut novel *The Foreigner*, in the words of Madhusudan Prasad, is "one of the most compelling existentialist works of Indian-English fiction." It is reminiscent of Albert Camus' famous novel *The Outsider* (*L'Étranger*). The novel is narrated by the protagonist Surinder "Sindi" Oberoi, an expatriate living in America to complete his doctoral degree in mechanical engineering. He is a disaffected young man of mixed parentage born in Kenya. After losing his parents at four, Sindi was brought up by his uncle. Having been deprived of parental love and affection at an early age, Sindi relied on his uncle for love and emotional support. With the death of his uncle, he felt like a ship which had lost its anchor. The devastating experience of losing his loved ones at a young age caused Sindi to become emotionally distant and alienated. The

rootlessness he felt after his uncle's death is described in the following words of Sindi: *"Now I suppose I existed only for dying."* (56). He goes to London for further studies after his uncle's death and later to America. The narrative follows two distinct timelines. It begins in the present at a morgue in Boston where the police have called Sindi to identify the body of his dead friend, Babu Rao Khemka. Many months later, he goes to India to meet Babu's family in Delhi to condone his death. Sindi meets Babu's sister Sheila and his father, Mr Khemka, who gives him a job in his firm. During his stay in India, Sindi recounts his past, which becomes the second narrative thread of the novel.

While he was in England, Sindi had amorous relationships with two older women named Anna, an artist, and Kathy, a housewife. Both relationships could not last long as Sindi left Anna for Kathy, with whom he fell in love. A while later, Kathy left him to go back to her husband because she considered marriage to be hallowed. The failure of these relationships had a significant impact on Sindi's life. The resulting heartbreak and emotional anguish taught him to become detached from his surroundings and not to get "involved" with people. In the naïve hope of leaving behind his tragic past, Sindi then goes to America for his doctoral degree in mechanical engineering. He meets and befriends a young woman named June Blyth, who comes to love him, and they have a passionate affair. Even though he realises that he loves her intensely, Sindi remains detached and afraid of commitment. During the early phase of their relationship, June makes an insightful remark about Sindi, which is highly significant:

*"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."* (29)

In America, Sindi meets and befriends Babu, a young student who has recently arrived in America for his higher studies. Even in his friendship with Babu, Sindi tries to remain detached and not become involved in his life. Through Sindi, Babu meets June and is instantly smitten with her. Initially, he thinks Sindi is in a relationship with her, but his denial causes him to start harbouring romantic feelings for her. Babu mistakes June's kind and caring nature for love and decides to marry her. June wants Sindi to marry her, but he says that he does not believe in marriage, as a marriage means *"possessing"* and *"being possessed."* Sindi feels that he is *"afraid of possessing anybody and....being possessed, and marriage meant both"* (91). He explains to her his beliefs about loving *"without wanting to possess"* and how a person *"should be able to detach oneself from the object of one's love"* (60). Sindi's detachment and unwillingness to marry her eventually causes June to end their relationship and accept Babu's proposal. This incident significantly impacts Sindi, and his life goes through an emotional tailspin, causing him to become lonely and depressed. To cope with his despair, Sindi leaves Boston, goes to New York and immerses himself in his work.

Sometime later, on one of his visits back to Boston, Sindi meets June and realises that she is unhappy in her relationship with Babu. In contrast to her earlier lively and vibrant self, she now sounds bitter and sardonic. Later she writes Sindi a letter describing Babu's irritability, jealousy and possessiveness towards her and his suspicion of her having an affair. When they next meet, June says that it was just a "silly letter" that she had written in a mood of self-pity, and her life is not really as dark and gloomy as she had described in it. She urges Sindi to tell her about his past life, including his relationships with Anna and Kathy. Sindi tells June that from the loss of his loved ones and his failed relationships, he learned that *"All love—whether of things, or persons, or oneself—was illusion and all pain sprang from this illusion. Love begot greed and attachment, and it led to possession"* (145). These experiences made Sindi the person he is and taught him to remain detached and uninvolved with others. Sindi realises that June is unhappy with her life, and to comfort her, he ends up spending the night with her, believing that he *"still held the key to June's happiness"* (165).

When June returns to Babu, he loses his temper, and during their argument, she angrily blurts out that she had spent the night with Sindi and had been in a relationship with him for over a year before she first met Babu. This revelation drives Babu over the edge, and he hits her before driving away in his car. He dies soon after in an accident. It is left ambiguous whether Babu had deliberately caused his death in the accident or it was an unfortunate incident that killed him. Babu's untimely death comes as a rude shock to both June and Sindi, who blames himself for his friend's death. He also writes to Babu's family, informing them of his demise. Sindi realises that he is not the same person anymore and feels *"as if there was nothing left that I could depend upon"* (149). A few months later, June informs Sindi in a letter that she is pregnant with Babu's child. Sindi is initially shocked by this knowledge but later comes to accept it. He promises June that he will come to meet her, but his visit to Boston unexpectedly gets delayed, and he fails to inform her about it. When Sindi eventually goes to meet her, he is informed by her neighbour that June died two days ago

following an unsuccessful abortion of Babu's child. This tragic news devastates Sindi, and he becomes terribly depressed. He realises that his confused and wavering approach towards life has cost him the lives of two people dear to him. He finally gains his first insight into the mystery of existence: "*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*" (162).

To start his life afresh, Sindi leaves America for good and goes to India to meet Babu's family. He is uncertain about his future and reluctantly accepts a job in Mr Khemka's firm. Here Sindi befriends Babu's sister Sheila who wants him to tell her more about her brother's life and the reason behind his untimely death in America. Sindi is wracked by guilt and feels responsible for Babu's death but lies to Sheila about it. Working in the firm, he eventually discovers his employer's corrupt financial practices, which has finally landed him under the radar of the Income Tax Department. One day, things come to a head when a team from the Income Tax Department comes to raid their office. Their firm is sealed, and Mr Khemka faces criminal charges for swindling the government. Meanwhile, Sindi applies for a job elsewhere and gets a call from two different companies in Bombay. He decides to leave Delhi for good. In a last-ditch attempt to save their firm from bankruptcy, Muthu, a worker in the firm, requests Sindi to take over its management. When he learns of Sindi's reluctance to get involved, Muthu makes him realise the true meaning of detachment: "*Sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved*" (188). Sindi's reluctance to get "involved" is finally dissolved, and he agrees to take charge of the firm.

Towards the end of his quest, Sindi realises that for him, "*detachment consisted in getting involved with the world*" (189). When he receives a call from Sheila, Sindi calls himself "Surrender" instead of Surinder, highlighting the nature of self-surrender implicit in his decision to get "involved" in the world around him finally. From the above discussion, it can be concluded that Surinder "Sindi" Oberoi can be seen as a sort of existential everyman. He is always on a quest towards happiness and self-realisation. Having been deprived of familial love and support at a young age, he becomes alienated and is acutely aware of his meaningless existence. Wherever he goes he is always asked questions regarding his belongingness which he finds vexing because of his inherent "foreignness" and his inability to "belong" anywhere. Sindi realises that his "foreignness" is not social or geographical, but it lies within himself. Whether he is in Kenya, England, America or India, he is a foreigner everywhere. Sindi's failure to "belong" anywhere always haunts him. He feels he belongs to no country, community, or society. He has no roots, faith or a clear-cut system of morality. Sindi realises that his existence is devoid of any meaning or purpose. He represents the existential crisis faced by the modern individual who suffers from rootlessness and identity crisis. Joshi's characterisation of Sindi is reminiscent of Camus' Meursault in *The Outsider*. Like Meursault, Sindi is always considered a "foreigner" and a "misfit." At one point, Joshi likens him to a spider on the ceiling, aimlessly moving "*upside down from one corner to another, exploring his inverted universe*" (90). He believes that he is not fit for this world and always seems exhausted and weary. The novel charts Sindi's journey from detachment to involvement and positive action. Other than the existential philosophy, Joshi has relied on the teachings of Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* to explore the concepts of attachment/detachment, action/inaction, and involvement/non-involvement and prescribe the spiritual practice of "selfless action." The minor character of Muthu believes in *karma-yoga*, i.e. doing one's duty without any attachment or anticipation of credit or result. He teaches Sindi to work selflessly for the benefit of others. With the crumbling of his detachment, Sindi's quest ends with him becoming a kind of *karma yogi* himself who now believes in right and valuable action. His earlier cynicism has now been replaced with a hope that the future may even provide him with a "*chance to redeem the past*" (185). The first monsoon and its shower at the end of the novel symbolise rebirth, fertility, happiness, hope and the removal of hopelessness and despair from the lives of Sindi and the firm's workers. While western existential writers do not necessarily provide any solution to the dilemma or crisis faced by their protagonists, Joshi differs significantly from them in this respect. Through his debut novel, *The Foreigner*, Joshi suggests that the practice of ethical and rightful action can remedy the malaises of a modern individual's existence.

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