



THEMES OF EXISTENTIALISM AND MATERIALISM IN ARUN JOSHI'S NOVELS

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Abstract:

This paper examines how Arun Joshi, a prominent Indian author, navigates the philosophical landscapes of existentialism and materialism in his novels. Joshi's narratives often delve into the existential crises faced by his protagonists, who grapple with questions of identity, purpose, and authenticity in the face of societal pressures and materialistic desires. His exploration of existentialist themes mirrors the works of European existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, yet Joshi adapts these themes to the socio-cultural context of postcolonial India. Novels like "The Stranger", "The Strange Case of Billy Biswas", "The Apprentice", "The City and the River", and "The Last Labyrinth" is a critique of existentialism and materialism and its impact on individual consciousness. Moreover, Joshi's depiction of materialism extends beyond mere consumerism to encompass broader socio-economic inequalities and the alienating effects of modern urban life. His critique resonates with postcolonial discourses on cultural identity and the legacy of colonial exploitation, highlighting how materialist values perpetuate disparities and disconnections within Indian society.

Keywords: Existentialism, Materialism, Inequalities, cultural identity, and Indian society.

Indian writing in English has established itself as a powerful and diverse literary tradition, blending cultural richness with linguistic innovation. Emerging in the colonial era and evolving through independence, this genre has significantly contributed to global literature. Writers like Rabindranath Tagore, R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arun Joshi, Amitav Ghosh,

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Arun Kolatkar, and Kiran Desai have captivated readers worldwide with their unique perspectives and narratives. Today, Indian English literature continues to flourish, reflecting the complexities of modern India while exploring universal themes of identity, migration, and societal change. As a testament to its enduring influence, it continues to produce groundbreaking works that resonate across borders and cultures.

Arun Joshi is an Indian writer who wrote primarily in English. He is known for his novels that explore themes such as existentialism, alienation, and the search for meaning in contemporary Indian society. Some of his notable works include “The Strange Case of Billy Biswas” is a novel that delves into the existential crisis of an Indian man who rejects urban life to live in the forests. “The Apprentice” is a novel that examines the life of a young man caught between traditional Indian values and modern aspirations. “The Last Labyrinth” is another novel that explores the themes of identity and self-discovery through the protagonist's journey in search of spiritual and personal truths. His works are characterized by their introspective nature and deep psychological insights into the human condition, making him a significant figure in Indian literature in English.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in Europe, which focuses on the individual's existence, freedom, and choices in an often indifferent and absurd world. At its core, existentialism emphasizes the individual's experience of existence and the consequences of their choices, rather than relying on abstract principles or external authorities for meaning. Existentialism emphasizes the freedom of individuals to make choices, but also highlights the responsibility that comes with this freedom. Choices are seen as significant because they define who we are and shape our existence.

Existentialists often describe the world as inherently meaningless or absurd. They explore how individuals confront this absurdity and create their own meanings and values in response. Existentialism has influenced various fields beyond philosophy, including literature, psychology, theology, and art, and continues to provoke thought and discussion about the nature of human existence and the search for meaning in a complex world.

Arun Joshi, an Indian writer known for his insightful exploration of existential themes, prominently features existentialism in his works. His novels delve into the existential dilemmas faced by individuals in contemporary Indian society, grappling with questions of identity, alienation, and the search for meaning

amidst rapid social change. One of Joshi's most notable works is the novel "The Strange Case of Billy Biswas". In this novel, Joshi portrays the protagonist, Billy Biswas, as a man who rejects conventional societal expectations and chooses to retreat to the wilderness in search of his true self. The novel explores Billy's existential crisis as he questions the meaning of life and struggles to reconcile his inner desires with societal norms.

Existential themes in Joshi's works are also evident in his novel "The Last Labyrinth". Here, the protagonist, Som Bhaskar, faces a mid-life crisis and existential angst as he reflects on his career, relationships, and the choices that have shaped his life. The novel examines the tension between personal fulfillment and societal expectations, highlighting the existential struggles of individuals trying to find purpose and authenticity in a world that often seems indifferent. In both of these novels, Joshi uses existentialism to critique Indian society and explore the complexities of individual identity and freedom. His characters confront existential dilemmas that resonate beyond their immediate context, making his works both introspective and socially relevant.

Arun Joshi's novel "The Foreigner" is indeed steeped in existentialist themes, exploring the existential crisis and alienation experienced by its protagonist, Sindi Oberoi. He feels disconnected from his surroundings and struggles to find meaning in his life. He grapples with a sense of alienation both in his personal relationships and in society at large. He undergoes a profound search for his identity and purpose. He questions his role in the world and seeks to understand his place in the universe amidst the complexities of modern life. The novel confronts the absurdity of existence, where characters often find themselves in situations that defy logic and conventional understanding. This theme reflects existentialist notions of the unpredictability and irrationality of human experience. Oberoi faces choices that underscore the existentialist emphasis on individual freedom and the accompanying responsibility to make meaningful decisions. His journey involves navigating these choices and their consequences.

Throughout the novel, there is a pervasive sense of existential angst - the anxiety and despair stemming from the realization of one's own mortality and the uncertainty of existence. Oberoi's internal struggles mirror this existential dread. Overall, "The Foreigner" can be seen as a work that grapples with the fundamental questions of existence, identity, and the human condition through an existentialist lens, making it a significant contribution to Indian literature in English. His exploration of existential themes in his novels contributes to a nuanced understanding of the human condition, reflecting on the universal struggles of

individuals trying to navigate their existence and find meaning in a world marked by uncertainty and change.

Materialism refers to a philosophical stance or worldview that emphasizes the significance of material or physical substances and processes over spiritual or metaphysical considerations. In broader terms, materialism can also refer to a focus on material wealth, possessions, and consumer goods as primary sources of value and meaning in life. Philosophical Materialism also known as physicalism, this philosophical position asserts that everything that exists is composed of material substances or is reducible to physical phenomena. It denies the existence of any supernatural or immaterial entities and seeks to explain all phenomena in terms of physical laws. Dialectical Materialism is a philosophical framework associated with Marxist theory, which posits that material conditions and economic factors are the primary drivers of historical and social change. Dialectical materialism emphasizes the interconnectedness of material processes and social relations.

Materialism often refers to a preoccupation with material wealth, possessions, and consumerism. It can imply a focus on material gain at the expense of spiritual or ethical considerations, and is sometimes critiqued for promoting shallow or superficial values. Materialism as a philosophical concept has been debated and critiqued throughout history, with proponents arguing for its empirical grounding and explanatory power, while critics raise concerns about its reductionism and potential neglect of non-material aspects of human experience, such as emotions, consciousness, and morality.

In Arun Joshi's works, particularly in novels like "The Strange Case of Billy Biswas" and "The Last Labyrinth", materialism is a recurring theme that serves as a critique of modern Indian society. Joshi explores how materialistic values and pursuits impact individuals' lives, relationships, and sense of identity. Joshi often portrays characters who are disillusioned with materialistic pursuits and the shallow values associated with wealth and status. For instance, in "The Strange Case of Billy Biswas", the protagonist rejects a life of material comfort and societal expectations to seek a deeper, more authentic existence in the wilderness. His journey can be seen as a critique of the emptiness and superficiality of consumerist culture.

Joshi's characters frequently experience alienation and a sense of disconnect in a materialistic society. They struggle with existential angst and a lack of fulfillment despite outward success or material possessions. This theme is evident in "The Last Labyrinth", where the protagonist, Som Bhaskar, grapples with mid-life crisis and questions the meaning of his material achievements. His novels often explore the

quest for meaning and authenticity in a world dominated by material concerns. Characters like Billy Biswas and Som Bhaskar embark on introspective journeys to discover their true selves and find meaning beyond material wealth and societal expectations.

Joshi's another novel "The City and the River" explores the theme of materialism in the context of modern Indian society. The novel portrays the rapid urbanization of India and the accompanying rise of consumer culture. The character, Mohan Kumar, navigates a world where material possessions and status symbols become increasingly important, influencing his own desires and motivations. It highlights the tension between traditional values and the allure of modern materialistic aspirations. Mohan Kumar struggles to reconcile his rural upbringing with the temptations and pressures of urban life, where success is often measured in terms of wealth and material acquisitions.

The novel explores how materialism perpetuates social hierarchies and exacerbates the divide between the affluent and the marginalized. Mohan Kumar's interactions with various characters from different socioeconomic backgrounds illustrate these disparities and their impact on personal relationships and societal dynamics. Amidst the pursuit of material wealth, the characters in the novel grapple with feelings of emptiness and alienation. Mohan Kumar's quest for success and validation through material means ultimately leaves him feeling disillusioned and disconnected from his true self and meaningful relationships. Joshi critiques the values of a capitalist society that prioritize material gain over spiritual fulfillment and human connection. Through his characters and narrative, he raises questions about the true cost of materialism and its impact on individual well-being and societal cohesion.

In "The City and the River", Joshi provides a nuanced exploration of materialism in contemporary India, highlighting its complexities and consequences through the lens of his characters' experiences and struggles. Overall, Joshi's portrayal of materialism and existentialism in his works is characterized by a deep critique of consumerist culture and its impact on individual identity and fulfillment. Through his narratives, Joshi invites readers to reflect on the consequences of prioritizing material gain over spiritual and existential fulfillment, highlighting the enduring relevance of these themes in contemporary Indian society.

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