



Postcolonial Identity, Alienation, and the Search for Selfhood in the Novels of Arun Joshi

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Abstract:

This paper explores the enduring psychological and epistemic fractures of the postcolonial condition through a critical analysis of Arun Joshi's seminal novels: *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), and *The Apprentice* (1974). While post-independence Indian literature frequently celebrated national liberation, Joshi focused on the unhealed internal displacement of the westernized, urban elite who remained marooned between conflicting Western ideologies and traditional Indian philosophies. Operating beyond conventional socio-political commentary, this study investigates how Joshi frames the postcolonial crisis as an ontological and spiritual dilemma. Structurally, the paper evaluates three distinct axes of this condition: transnational displacement and fractured identity in *The Foreigner*, the radical rejection of Western modernity in pursuit of indigenous authenticity in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, and the psychological and institutional corruption born of colonial mimicry in *The Apprentice*. To unpack these narratives, the study deploys a composite postcolonial framework drawing upon Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and mimicry, Frantz Fanon's socio-diagnostics of colonial psychopathology, and Edward Said's critique of epistemic imperialism. Additionally, it illuminates how Joshi synthesizes Western existentialism (Sartre, Camus, Kierkegaard) with classical Indian metaphysics, particularly the *Bhagavad Gita*, to map his protagonists' descent into alienation and their subsequent search for ethical redemption. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that Joshi's novels transcend mere regional narratives, offering a profound, universal inquiry into the possibility of reclaiming an authentic, self-conscious identity amidst the pervasive ruins of colonial modernity.

Keywords: Postcolonial Identity, Existential Alienation, Hybridity, Epistemic Imperialism, Moral Redemption.

Introduction:

The transition from colonial subjugation to national sovereignty in post-independence India generated a dominant literary discourse centered on national consolidation and political triumph. However, this nationalist fervor frequently overlooked the enduring epistemic and psychological fractures embedded within the postcolonial consciousness. Arun Joshi occupies a crucial position within Indian English fiction precisely because his narratives interrogate this unmapped terrain of internal displacement. Recognizing that formal decolonization did not automatically confer psychological or cultural liberation, Joshi focused his authorial lens on the urban,

westernized intelligentsia. These individuals, though occupying positions of socioeconomic privilege, found themselves textually and ontologically marooned—fluent in the syntax of Western modernity yet structurally severed from the grounding matrices of traditional Indian philosophy.

This paper provides a critical, comparative examination of the postcolonial crisis through an in-depth analysis of Joshi's triad of early novels: *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), and *The Apprentice* (1974). Rather than treating postcoloniality as a generic socio-political category, Joshi contextualizes it as an existential and spiritual dilemma. The study charts how this dilemma manifests across



three distinct thematic axes: the transnational alienation and fractured identity of the global citizen in *The Foreigner*, the absolute renunciation of Western technocratic modernity in favor of indigenous, tribal authenticity in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, and the psychological and institutional degradation caused by colonial mimicry in *The Apprentice*. To deconstruct these complex interior landscapes, the study deploys a robust theoretical framework synthesizing the postcolonial hermeneutics of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Edward Said. By aligning these theories with Joshi's unique synthesis of European existentialism—specifically the philosophies of Sartre, Camus, and Kierkegaard—and the metaphysical tenets of the *Bhagavad Gita*, this paper illuminates the mechanics of identity contestation, moral conflict, and ultimate ethical redemption in Joshi's enduring critique of colonial modernity.

Postcolonial Identity in *The Foreigner*

The *Foreigner* has been presented as one of the earliest and profound representations of the theme of alienation of people in different cultures in Indian English fiction. The protagonist of this play is Sindi Oberoi, who is born to parents with different cultural backgrounds; his father is an Indian and his mother an Englishwoman. It is due to his dual cultural heritage that he suffers from such emotional conflicts. He was born at the point where two worlds meet each other and it is shown in the story how such experiences make him suffer emotionally and mentally during his stay in different parts of Africa, Britain, America and finally India.

The internal conflicts that Sindi experiences due to her feeling of alienation depict the profound influence on psyche that postcolonial hybridity brings about. He remains aloof when it comes to relationships, commitments, and obligations toward society. His sense of loneliness does not apply only to him, but serves as a metaphor

for people affected by a combination of cultures. Being neither at home in India nor in the West, he lacks a sense of belonging to either of these environments, which leaves him constantly feeling out of place. Through the character of Sindi, Joshi presents a man born without having any place in the world, devoid of culture and lacking any notion of himself and his obligations to the rest of humanity. It is not just one episode in a person's biography that Joshi describes here; he depicts the essence of the postcolonial individual brought up amidst two vastly different worlds.

It becomes possible to comprehend the novel within the framework of the essential notion formulated by Homi Bhabha concerning the third space. The third space is an ambiguous area where postcolonial identity is created; its peculiarities lie in the combination of the cultural heritage of the colonizers and that of the colonized nations. Sindi exists in the third space not as an area of creativity and possibilities that Bhabha emphasizes but as an actual place burdened with ambiguities and hardships. He cannot identify with either Indian culture or the world of Western modernism, and all of his attempts to create his own identity are complicated due to the contradictions inherent in his mixed identity. His inability to feel emotionally connected to certain situations, including romance, becomes one of the evidences of this problem.

On the contrary, Joshi's philosophy of detachment is not only a critique of individualism in Western culture. One should note that the whole philosophy in the book is based on numerous concepts from the *Bhagavad Gita*, especially such an important one as nishkama karma, the meaning of which is doing anything selflessly without attachment to the results of actions. At first, Sindi perceives the idea of detachment as absence of emotions, including lack of desire to establish relations with other people and



absence of personal involvement and responsibility for his actions. However, his gradual transformation allows him to understand the true nature of detachment: contrary to popular belief, detachment does not imply detachment from everything around a person but participation in life without being under control of selfish feelings. As Joshi noted, the novel is dedicated to the idea that sometimes to be far from something means getting close to it. Thus, by the end of the novel, the reader understands how Sindi learns to bear responsibility and emotional connection in order to understand himself.

It even poses questions about modern urban lifestyle that concentrates on individuality and alienation from other people. At first, Sindi views attachment as a thing that makes one suffer, so he refuses to get attached to anybody. His relationship with Mr. Khemka, members of his family, and June illustrate the moral costs of such an attitude, but this alienation eventually ends up in spiritual desolation rather than the inner peace Sindi expected to find. According to Joshi, when people try to apply the Western concept of individualism into their lives, treating their career success and personal happiness as the highest priorities, they become alienated from other people and deprived of inner peace. The Foreigner depicts the postcolonial identity as a conflict between the traditional cultural heritage of the society and the new outlook on it. Such a confrontation can only be resolved by coming back to the ethical involvement and self-consciousness.

Rejection of Colonial Modernity in The Strange Case of Billy Biswas

"Billy Biswas" may be considered as Arun Joshi's boldest and most political novel, since it clearly and consistently criticizes urban culture in the postcolonial period. Billy Biswas is born into a family of wealthy and educated people living in Delhi. The

family belongs to the new Indian upper class, which was created under the influence of colonial schooling and the development that followed India's liberation. He received an excellent education and became an anthropologist; he graduated from a college in the USA and had all necessary social characteristics that are considered successful in modern Indian society. But despite all advantages, Billy experiences deep and strong dissatisfaction with the life of the city that makes him abandon his family, career, and social relations in order to join some tribes in the remote forests of central India.

Billy's fascination with living like a member of a tribe can be interpreted as his rejection of everything that Frantz Fanon refers to when he states that the colonized individual accepts values and identity imposed by the colonizer. Indeed, the urban educated Indian society presented in the novel appears to be superficial, devoid of spirituality, morality, and genuine emotions. Thus, the world in which Billy lived before he managed to escape is characterized by the desire for external showiness, material prosperity, and disregard for genuine human emotions in order to ascend the social ladder and gain some social prestige. Being incapable of finding any source of inspiration, Billy finds himself in the grip of this reality. Therefore, his turning to tribal communities reveals the fact that he does not romanticize the past but rather seeks real authenticity.

Thus, the tribal world of the story is portrayed as a new location, where the issues of modern society have never reached. There is something that Billy experiences as a unity with nature, community, and a natural truth among the tribesmen which does not exist in the city at all. There is something that makes him feel comfortable and at home among the tribesmen, something he never experienced in his complex world of Delhi. This contrast is made by Joshi on purpose to show how



absurd it seems for the postcolonial society to blindly adopt the Western mentality. In today's Indian world consisting of many educated people – including Billy's relatives, coworkers, and friends - the only criteria of success are wealth, prestige, and professional achievements without paying any attention to emotions and spirituality.

At another level, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* demonstrates the dislocation that individuals raised under a postcolonial education system experience when trying to relate to their own cultural emotions. This can be understood using the concept of Orientalism by Edward Said. Colonialism inculcated into individuals a sense of their own native practices being worthless, irrational, or crude. Instead, the Western culture was made out to be the universal ideal for civilization. Billy's rebellion against this social order, which consists of his decision to stay among those whom educated India considers uncivilized or barbaric, is an attempt to free himself from the thoughts imposed on him by colonization.

On the other hand, the writer does not present this act of defiance by Billy in such a way that makes it seem victorious. This is exemplified by the tragic death of Billy, which was brought on by the members of the society that he abandoned. The lack of a happy ending in this book is due to the understanding of the fact that modern systems that were formed in cities post-colonialism are deeply ingrained into the lives of the people and therefore cannot be overcome easily. Through Billy's fate, the writer brings to light the challenges of modern times, and warns against the personal cost involved in going against the norm.

Moral Decline and Corruption After Colonialism in *The Apprentice*

Apprentice is a novel that looks into the ethical dilemma of post-independent India through the case of Ratan Rathor. In this novel, the author employs the technique

of confessional narration where Ratan's story is narrated to the reader in a confessional form. It is important to note that by using this technique, Joshi makes the ethical analysis of oneself the focal point of the novel. Contrary to Sindi Oberoi who drifted away and Billy Biswas who took the radical option to escape from his situation, Ratan's dilemma stems from the ethical compromises one has to make as a profession. The reason why the story appeals to many people is due to its relevance.

The Apprentice explores the ethical dilemmas in post-independent India through the portrayal of the character Ratan Rathor. The plot is narrated in a direct address to the reader. How the story is narrated is very important since the narrative technique employed by Joshi makes the notion of self-examination a central theme in *The Apprentice*. However, the problem facing Ratan Rathor differs from Sindi Oberoi's search for a purpose and Billy Biswas' complete withdrawal from society. What Ratan is grappling with is a result of those moral compromises in work situations that people make on a day-to-day basis. Many people will be able to connect with Ratan because his experience highlights something that everyone experiences.

Although colonial governance had officially come to an end in India, there are several issues such as the mindset of power, greed and exploiting people which continue to shape the public culture as reflected in Joshi's *India post-colonial*. In the bureaucracy system where Ratan works, compromising and being flexible become more important than integrity in dealing with the pressures exerted by the institution. This is indicative of the fact that the legacy of colonialism in India is neither political nor social but cultural/psychological, where a ruling class emerges from within the society and develops a mentality where public posts are seen as an opportunity for acquiring



personal gains, rather than a responsibility owed to those whom they represent.

Ratan feels guilty about himself as he is well aware of his mistakes and weaknesses, and such feelings hurt him very much. It can be said that there is an inner conflict in Ratan between his knowledge of morality inherited from his father, i.e., people from the pre-independence era who sacrificed everything for their righteous causes, and today's world where only those are rewarded who can compromise on everything. As per Joshi's perspective, the issue of post-colonial India cannot be said to be due to the absence of moral values, but there is a struggle within individuals to implement the morals which they have inherited.

In contrast to those who are completely pessimistic, The Apprentice provides a hope of transformation for individuals into a better person. In terms of the confessional mode of the novel, the first step to gain ethics is represented through Ratan's willingness to take responsibility for his faults. Joshi argues, referring to the ideas of the Bhagavad Gita, that awareness of your own mistake is not simply a reason to be embarrassed but rather serves as a kind of awakening to your moral values. Therefore, the process of self-realization begins when a person is able to look inside and admit their weaknesses or mistakes, rather than try to avoid them. It is evident that Ratan is able to see himself through the eyes of an objective observer and admit his faults. This positive attitude distinguishes Joshi's approach to morality from pessimism.

Alienation as a Postcolonial Condition

The issue of alienation has been very much present in Arun Joshi's stories; indeed, it can be said that it is the core element of Joshi's writings. In the midst of vibrant social gatherings where his protagonists are surrounded by their families, friends, colleagues, and loved ones, these individuals experience a sense of emotional isolation; in

other words, despite all the company around them, they are unable to establish meaningful relationships with anyone. This feeling of loneliness emerges because of cultural fragmentation and the absence of self-identity, which must exist for one to connect with others. According to Joshi's portrayal of the postcolonial era, people of the time suffer from both types of alienation: alienation from society and from their own selves.

Postcolonial modernity results in educated individuals with intellectual knowledge who doubt in the spiritual aspect. People become doubtful of their traditions as colonialism has devalued or destroyed traditional sources of sense, but at the same time, materialistic modernity does not satisfy people spiritually, leaving them unhappy. Education has helped people adapt to economic and labor conditions of globalization, yet they lack the spiritual component, because educational system does not provide the answer to fundamental questions about sense and place of humans in life. In this regard, they experience spiritual and emotional hesitation when they can cope with practical issues of life but not spiritual problems.

The method used by Joshi for coping with the state of isolation stands sharply distinct from traditional and purely Western conceptions of life, despite the fact that Joshi was clearly inspired by existentialists such as Sartre and Camus. According to the philosophy of traditional Western existentialism, alienation is viewed as an inherent feature of a person living in an essentially meaningless universe. Regardless of how long and hard it might be, the heroes of Joshi's stories take steps toward recovery, utilizing some peculiarities of Indian philosophical concepts. Lessons derived from the Bhagavad Gita involve the necessity to act unselfishly, behave responsibly on a moral level and foster an inner peace. Thus, the teachings allow overcoming problems



associated with alienation in a way unattainable through purely Western existentialist means. In Joshi's stories, the experience of alienation serves both as an obstacle to successful self-development and as a unique opportunity for gaining better self-understanding.

It is also worth noting the social implications of this alienation as well. Joshi's characters, rather than being random individuals who suffer from mental disorders, are representative of cultural conflicts in the postcolonial context of India. The members of the middle class in India were formed during the colonial period, where they were trained to be like their Western counterparts and view their native Indian culture as backward and insignificant. But the impact of the independence movement and cultural activity of India have led to an even stronger identification with their culture and an indigenous identity. The result is a form of what W. E. B. Du Bois describes as double consciousness. An interesting concept introduced by.

Spirituality versus Materialism

One of the persistent problems in the stories written by Joshi after colonial rule is the opposition between spirituality and materialism. In other words, this is a conflict between the inner world of a person and the outer world centered around the pursuit of tangible success, status and career. Thus, the life in the Western modern world is viewed by Joshi as a sphere where competitiveness, self-improvement and material acquisition are the highest priorities shaping society. At the same time, the Indian philosophical thought mentioned by Joshi, especially in its Vedanta and Gita versions, emphasizes self-realization, tranquility and overcoming the ego-driven desires that result in materialism and competitiveness.

Often Joshi wonders whether attaining worldly possessions could possibly make anyone happy, and the answer he gives

each time is "no." Billy Biswas renounces all his riches and societal privileges to seek out true spiritual liberation and a life style that works for him. Sindi Oberoi comes to understand the emptiness of emotional detachment, which she uses as a means of self-preservation rather than spiritual attainment. Ratan Rathor suffers from the pangs of agony as he realizes that the worldly achievement in his career, which has been attained at the expense of his integrity, does not give him happiness but rather the burden of guilt and an awakening of his true self. In all cases, it becomes apparent how the emphasis on materialism, which modern times postcolonial era offers as an identity of man, fails in its fulfillment of man's inner necessities.

These individuals help illustrate the fact that for many post-colonial Indians, assimilating into Western materialistic society is seen as development and progression. In her works, Joshi illustrates the perception that Western material values need to be accepted in order to become modern. Joshi argues that this perception has resulted in an immense cultural loss, since there has been a decline of the spiritual essence of a society despite economic prosperity. The novels emphasize that an excessive preoccupation with material values results in instability and immorality, which prevents humans from developing a sense of connection both with other human beings and their surroundings, let alone themselves.

However, there is a historical dimension to the conflict between the two forces in Joshi's stories. The generation of Ratan's father is called the independence generation; it is characterized by the strength of morals and spirituality that allowed making sacrifices. After the period of independence, people have received their freedom politically, but they did not receive it spiritually or morally. The result is the absence of a certain moral code that becomes



replaced with the consumerist and individualistic ideas from the West. Overall, one may consider Joshi's stories as a long discourse on finding a specific Indian spiritual tradition to make up for a true postcolonial culture; the latter would not overly depend on the West and at the same time would not naively romanticize pre-colonial times.

Hybridity and Cultural In-Betweenness

The concept of hybridity becomes particularly important in the case of the main characters of Joshi and the problems they encounter. In their minds, they occupy a position in between two separate cultures, leading them to experience a powerful feeling of dislocation regarding who they are. The important theories formulated by Homi Bhabha regarding hybridity as an important part of people's identity after colonization are pertinent to this issue. According to the latter scholar, a person that belongs to a country that was colonized becomes a product of the intersection between the culture of the colonizer and the traditions of the colonized. The identity of the former arises in a 'third space', which is neither fully one thing nor another. For Bhabha, this area represents cultural creativity and resistance. Yet, as we see in the case of Joshi, it also entails psychological discomfort.

The mixed cultural heritage of Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner*, whose parents come from different cultures, is an example of how cultures may blend together in the most explicit form possible. His half-Indian and half-English parents have already given birth to a son who is unable to belong either here or there but is himself a symbol of their meeting. This mixture of cultures is shown in the book not only from the perspective of his personal life. The process of colonialism leads to the emergence of individuals who have different cultural identities because of what happened during colonization times.

The case with Billy Biswas is somewhat different and perhaps more complex since it does not involve any racial hybridity in the family background. Billy grew up in the Western system of higher education, receiving Western anthropological knowledge. He has also been shaped by the values of modern educated India. Nevertheless, his emotional ties lie on the side of the tribal community that his education makes him observe from a distance like an object to study, rather than be a part of. It appears that Billy is drawn to resolve the issue of hybridity through adopting exclusively the indigenous identity and, thus, freeing himself from his mixed character traits. Apparently, it is impossible for Billy to achieve what he wants because the very situation he was born into does not allow him to do that. Death of Billy in the novel means that it was not possible for him to escape the liminal space created by the processes of colonization.

The hybridity seen in Rathor's case is totally different from the one we have discussed before. He is caught between the moral values that belong to the generation preceding the independence and are based on the Gandhian principles of truthfulness, unselfishness, and service to the community, on one hand, and the system of bureaucracy established after independence, where negotiation is favored and frankness may cause problems. This kind of conflict within an individual belongs to the category of cultural hybridity, but not in ethnic or educational terms, rather in moral. There are two contradicting value systems that coexist within him, and the agony he feels arises from their incompatibility.

Joshi's Narrative Technique and Philosophical Vision

Other than the themes discussed above, it will be prudent to also take note of the structure of Joshi's work and its philosophical elements, which are critical for



the expression of his post-colonial notions. While the storytelling in Joshi's major novels varies greatly from one another, these variations are more than simply stylistic in nature. In fact, these variations are crucial as they are directly related to the specific theme expressed by Joshi within the novel. For instance, *The Foreigner* employs a narrative technique of Sindi narrating his own experience through memories of events that have taken place. However, this technique is significant due to the distance created through this approach.

In the *Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Romi narrates the events, as opposed to having Billy Biswas tell the story himself. This mode of narration is an aspect worth considering, inasmuch as Billy has moved beyond the point where he can express himself normally in any way – his experiences among the tribe people have moved beyond what can be reached by educated urban people – and, therefore, a narrator from the world that Billy has left behind has to narrate the story. The novel brings out the very problem it discusses; namely, the situation where the postcolonial individual finds that the dominant culture represents him and makes sense of his life.

As discussed above, the confessional talk in *The Apprentice* brings the activity of introspecting upon the individual's personal ethics into the very center of the plot. Such a narrative technique unites features of Western storytelling techniques and Indian methods of introspection that are associated with the notion of *viveka* described in the *Bhagavad Gita* and implying discernment. Ratan's willingness to critically examine his mistakes without justifying his actions is presented by the author as a manifestation of morality.

Philosophically speaking, the uniqueness and effectiveness of the blending of Western existentialism and Indian philosophy lie in Joshi's work. The central

idea that all his protagonists share is the concept of finding one's meaning and value in a meaningless world, which does not bestow this value on a person itself. Unlike Sartre's atheistic and Camus' absurd philosophy, the philosophy of Joshi is imbued with the spirit of hope and spirituality characteristic of Indian culture. The search for the authentic self is typical of the Western existentialist tradition. But in the case of Joshi, his characters seek *moksha*, or rather inner liberation. This gives the author a special existential philosophy that cannot be defined strictly as postcolonial. It absorbs elements from both traditions.

Conclusion

The narrative corpus of Arun Joshi provides an invaluable diagnostic of the interiorized, psychological dimensions of the postcolonial condition within Indian English literature. His novels demonstrate that the ramifications of the colonial enterprise extended far beyond geopolitical dominance, penetrating the profoundest layers of the subject's psyche, cognitive frameworks, and moral orientation. Through the fractured experiences of the protagonists in *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, and *The Apprentice*, Joshi dramatizes the systemic crises of alienation, ontological fragmentation, and ethical ambiguity engineered by colonial modernity.

Crucially, Joshi's unique contribution to postcolonial letters lies in his refusal to reduce the postcolonial experience to a static narrative of victimization or cultural despair. Instead, his works systematically embed a trajectory of reclamation, healing, and ethical reconstruction. To achieve this, Joshi integrates classical Indian philosophical paradigms—specifically the *Bhagavad Gita's* imperative of selflessness (*Nishkama Karma*), Vedantic inner epistemology, and Gandhian concepts of truth (*Satyagraha*) and ethical accountability. Rather than advocating for a simplistic, nostalgic retreat



into a pre-colonial past, Joshi synthesizes these indigenous metaphysical systems with Western existentialist thought. The resulting literary matrix is neither an imitation of Eurocentric modernism nor a nativist rejection of it, but a highly sophisticated, hybridized discursive formation that maps a genuine path toward self-discovery.

Beyond their immediate historical specificity within post-independence South Asian literature, Joshi's narratives possess an enduring, cross-cultural resonance in an increasingly globalized, multicultural landscape. The existential challenges he interrogates—including the fragmentation of identity, the search for authentic self-positioning, and the negotiation of individual morality amidst conflicting cultural mandates—transcend the temporal boundaries of early post-independence India. Ultimately, by illustrating how the postcolonial subject can navigate plural cultural matrices to achieve agency and ethical redemption, Joshi's work offers a vital framework for understanding the modern self. His position within the canon of world literature remains firmly secured, offering profound insights into the resilience of the human consciousness at the crossroads of cultures.

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