CHAPTER-II
Existentialist Concerns in the Post Independence Indian English Fiction
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As in other Commonwealth countries, the novel writing in English in our country too became a vehicle for the expression of our indigenous ethos. With its comparative flexibility and amorphousness, the novel provided a unique literary phenomenon. Initially we come across the historical romances such as, S.K. Nikambe’s *Ratnabai* (1895), R.C. Dutt’s *The Slave Girl of Agra* (1909), S. K. Ghosh’s *The Prince of Destiny* and S. K. Mitra’s *Hindupur* (1909).

In the 1930s and 1940s a new trend is perceptible in the Indian English Novel. It lays emphasis on social and political realism. The freedom movement of Mahatma Gandhi inspired several Indian English novelists. Even after Independence, the freedom movement of Mahatma Gandhi continued to inspire quite a few Indian-English novelists such as R.K. Narayan, K.A. Abbas, N. Nagarajan, Raja Rao, Manohar Malgaonkar, Nayantara Sahgal and Chaman Nahal. But the greatest fillip to the Indian-English novel was given by the “Big three” — M.R. Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable* (1935), R. K. Narayan in *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) and *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) and Raja Rao in *Kanthpura* (1955) deal with one or the other of the Gandhian themes. The three have respectively
been called "the novelist as reformer...the novelist as moral analyst...(and) the novelist as metaphysical poet". Regarding the contribution of big three, William Walsh quite aptly says that

It was these three who defined the area in which the Indian novel was to operate. They established the suppositions, the manner, the idiom, the concept of character and the nature of the themes, which were to give the Indian novel its particular distinctiveness.¹

Mulk Raj Anand is the first writer who gave to the Indian English novel a definite tone and texture. He is, as Iyenger says, "the advocate of the down trodden and the underprivileged."² R.K. Narayan, a product of the South Indian Hindu middle class family, remained aloof from the contemporary social political issues. He explored the South Indian middle class milieu in his Malgudi fiction. Like a seasoned artist, he aptly explores "the staying power of the society...whose hundred ills have not destroyed the moral and spiritual base of the individual."³ Using Western technique but Indian material, Narayan has been commendably successful, to use William Walsh's words, "in making an Indian sensibility at home in English art."⁴

The tradition of social realism of Mulk Raj Anand has been followed by Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, Khushwant Singh and Chaman Nahal. The poverty, hunger and deprivation as
consequeness of World war II and the Bengal famine have been depicted realistically by Bhabani Bhattacharya in So Many Hungers (1947) and He Who Rides a Tiger (1954). The hungers, fear and misery faced by the people after Independence find poignant expression in Kamala Markandaya’s Nectar in a Sieve (1954) and A Handful of Rice (1966). The clash between tradition and modernity, Gandhi’s vision of rural reconstruction and Nehru’s plan of rapid industrialization constitute the theme of Bhabani Bhattacharya’s Music for Mohini (1952) and Shadow from Laddakh (1966). The horrors and inhuman atrocities of partition in the name of regions find powerful expression in Khushwant Singh’s Train to Pakistan (1956), Chaman Nahal’s Azadi (1975), Manohar Malgaonkar’s Distant Drum (1960) and A Bend in the Ganges (1964). The theme of social change from traditional values to modern ones and the transformation of the socio-cultural milieu have been dealt with in Menon Marath’s The Wound of Spring (1961), Venu Chitale’s In Transit (1950) and Attia Hussain’s Sunlight on a Broken Column. In Sudhin Ghose’s tetralogy-And Gazelles Leaping (1949), Cradle of the Clouds (1951), The Vermilion Boat (1953) and The Flame of the Forest (1955), We find the protagonist endeavoring to adjust himself to the changing times. An altogether different kind of novel we witness in All About H.Hatterr by
G.V. Desani. It is an experimental kind of outstanding novel full of practical wisdom.

Many post-Independence novelists endeavour to explore the theme of encounter between the East and the West. The theme has been explored in Kamala Markandaya’s *Possession* (1963), Balchandra Rajan’s *The Dark Dancer* (1959), Ruth Prawer Jhabavala’s *Esmond in India* (1958) and *Heat and Dust* (1975), Santa Rama Rao’s *Remember the House* (1956), Nayantara Sahgal’s *Bye Bye Blackbird* (1978). We find the finest example of the East and West encounter in Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) where Ramaswami, an Indian scholar and Madeliene, his French wife, part ways because of the basic incompatibility of these two cultures.

Social realism not with standing, the authors now shifted their focus from the public sphere to the private sphere of individuals by probing deeper into individual psyche. Kamala Markandaya’s *The Nowhere Man* (1972) is about the psychological crisis of an Indian immigrant in London. Similarly B. Rajan’s *The Dark Dancer* (1959) depicts the thought processes of an embittered woman persecuted and alienated from her family. In *A Time to be Happy* (1958) and *This Time of Morning* (1968), Nayantara Sahgal has interwoven the political turmoil of the world outside and the private torment of the inner world of
individuals. In these we find the theme of loneliness, self-realization and sexual liberation. The novels of Anita Desai and Arun Joshi are the result of the complex socio-political situation in the post-independence days, which only got a fillip by the West.

Anita Desai tried to explore the sensibility of modern Indian generation ill at ease in the modern, rudder-less, chaotic set-up. With this emerged the anti-hero in the Indian English novel. Anita Desai writes in *Voices in the City* (1956) that an unheroic hero is "a man for whom aloneness alone was the sole natural condition, aloneness alone was the treasure worth treasuring." Her novels explore the loneliness of individuals. The crisis in her novels such as *Cry the Peacock* (1977) and *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), and *Journey to Ithaca* emerge from the pain born of broken marriages, emotional trauma and the failure of communication between individuals. She proved to be a crucial pioneer in the psychological exploration of feminist concerns and proved to be a major post-colonial Indian novelist.

In the Eighties yet another breed of novelists emerged. It includes Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Allan sealy, Shashi Deshpande, Shashi Tharoor, Farukh Dhondi, Amitav Ghosh, Bapsi Sidhwa, Ipsita Roy Chakraverti, Sudhir Kakkar, Dina Mehta, Dolly Ramanujan, Arundhati Roy and others. A part from these some lesser
novelists have also emerged on the contemporary scene such as Shiv K. Kumar, Saros Cowasjee, Raji Narasimha, Vasant A. Shahane, K. V. Subbaram, Ranga Rao, Raj Gill, Balraj Khanna and others. Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* changed the substance and tenor of the Indian – English novel. From the corridors of St. Stephen’s College alone emerged Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Upmanyu Chatterjee, Allan Sealy and Shashi Tharoor. They have produced works that exhibit their remarkable ease with language. New novelists with new visions, new themes and new technical and linguistic devices are gaining recognition abroad, which insures a bright future for the Indian-English novel.

A cursory glance at the post-Independence Indian English fiction reveals a significant development in the form of the Existentialist novel. It brings to light “a shift of emphasis from the external to the internal, the outer to the inner etching the contours of the interior landscape of the individuals mind”.

Although the existentialist element is also traceable, to some extent, in some of the works of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, these novelists can not be called existentialistic by any means. But Anita Desai, Arun Joshi, Sasthi Brata, Saroj Cowasjee, Shiv K. Kumar, Y.P. Dhawan and Nayan Tara Sahgal are the novelists whose works display a strong undercurrent of existentialism. Anita Desai is the
novelist who seems to me to be fully committed to existentialist themes. She skilfully exposes mainly through remarkable imagery and symbolism, the emotional ecology of the turbulent inner world of individuals tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments.

Like Desai, Arun Joshi is also a novelist who powerfully depicts existentialist dilemmas, evoking our cultural heritage and inerparable moral values. In his novels, Joshi treats different facets of alienation. The Forigner deals with the alienation of the self. It traces Sindi Oberois rootlessness and search for identity. The Strange Case of Billy Biswas which is seemingly inspired by Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer and Saul Bellow’s Henderson the Rain King and The Adventures of Augie March is a powerful novel. It shows Billy Biswas’s alienation from the ostentatious, phoney society of today and his resultant quest for a better way of life. The Apprentice which is modelled technically on Comus’s The Fall is written in the form of a monologue. It dramatizes Ratan Rathor's alienation from his soul caused by a strong guilt consciousness. The Last Laby rinth, which won the Sahtiya Academy Award of 1982 is a great novel. It evokes alienation from the self again, the victim protagonist being Som Bhaskar, an intellectual debauchee and industrialist. Prof. M.K. Naik has thus assessed Joshi:
Joshi is a novelist seriously interested in existentialist dilemmas and equally acutely aware of both the problems of post Independence Indian society and the implications of the East-West encounter. He is a skilled narrator and can make an entire novel a long-monologue (as in The Apprentice) without losing his hold over the reader's attention. He has the vision and the technique. All he needs is greater maturity.

Sasthi Brata, an expatriate living in England, also displays existentialist concerns in his obtrusively autobiographical novels, Confessions of an Indian woman Eater and She and He. They are characterized by angry rebellion against the tradition bound Indian society, alienation, rootlessness and futile search for moorings. Saros Cowasjee's Good Bye to Elsa and Shiv K. Kumar’s The Bone’s Prayer and Nude Before God also deal with alienation and futile search for meaning and the resultant agony and restlessness. Y.P. Dhawan’s Beyond the Guru and Journey through Hell effectively depict the existentialist theme of alienation and agonized quest for meaning in life.

Arun Joshi (1939-93) classed with such Indian-English novelists as Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai, has been concerned more with the dilemma of the human loneliness which has various manifestations in the forms of powerlessness, meaninglessness, formlessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation and self-estrangement. Alienation serves to
be an important characteristic of his protagonists. Elizabeth B. Hurlock' in her book *Personality Development*, has thus dwelt upon it:

In general, the alienation is marked by such unsocial behaviour as teasing and bullying, making unpleasant comments, being hypocritical, intentionally annoying people, lying and being sneaky, rising alibits and projecting blame on others, and being sullen, sulky and moody. People characterized by the socially ineffective syndrome are annoying to others, while those characterized by the recessive and socially disinterested are so distasteful that others have no desire to have anything to do with them.9

All these forms of alienation have passed into the psyche of modern man. Mechanization, urbanization, growing hostility due to changing values, depersonalization, self-misgivings, delusions, rootlessness, discontent, psychological and other maladjustments characterize the modern world. All these taken together have made alienation a part of our life. We live in a world plagued by several forms of crisis in which we are even enmeshed in the crisis of our identity and consciousness.

The different variants of alienation, which are much larger than the crisis of identity, may be grouped into two:

First with man's alienation from society, which is the most prevalent kind of alienation, and, second his alienation from his own self. A non-conformist is alienated from society by rebelling against it, but a conformist is alienated from his own self by not
following the voice of his conscience. It is this division of self, which does not let man live in peace.¹⁰

Many of the novelists have withdrawn from the outer world to the inner world to explore the problem of human existence and to this Arun Joshi along with certain other novelists of his type is no exception. In an interview, Arun Joshi has confessed that he was prompted into writing to explore "that mysterious underworld which is the human soul."¹¹ In another statement, Arun Joshi has said that he "essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of himself."¹² In the fictional world of Arun Joshi, the questions of the self and its existence are the points to be probed. He delves deep in to the dark recesses of the mind that are the inscrutable region of uncertainty and inscrutability. As R. K Dhawan writes:

Reading Joshi's novels is not always a smooth experience; there are moments when one is assailed by doubts and questions. There is "something" that attracts one's attention and then grips. Joshi delves into the inner recesses of human psyche where he finds instincts and impulses at work; he seeks a process of the apprehension of reality, which may lead him to the world of the core of the truth of man's life. He realizes man's uniqueness and loneliness in an indifferent and inscrutable universe.¹³

Indian English fiction is now several generations old. The second-generation novelists, that Joshi belongs, stand on a different footing from
older generation novelists like Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya. Arun Joshi does not propagate any social or political creed unlike Mulk Raj Anand; neither does he create the ironic vision of R. K. Narayan in his sense of place and the social realism and moral issues of Bhabani Bhattacharya. The philosophical concerns of Raja Rao are almost not to Arun Joshi’s likings. Joshi’s novels may have philosophical reverberations, but they are not philosophical as such. Joshi is a child of the modern world both in its national and international contexts. His novels have an outer world, no doubt; but this is simply in the form of a background to his love for depicting the inner world, which is psychological.

Through various sources we witness a number of literary and non-literary influences, which have their profound impact on Arun Joshi’s creative sensibility. The most dominant among them are Hindu scriptures-The Bhagavadgita, The Upanishads, Vedanta-and Mahatma Gandhi. In his interview with Pier Paolo Piciuco, he accepts that the Hindu tradition has influenced him the most. He candidly seeks his affinity with India:

I certainly have some affinities with this country [India]; I have found it lately. One is the affinity of the spiritual kind, then there is the affinity of the sensual kind and there are others, too. Each country in India is very unique, and all India still remains unique. You know, historically, India has always been very inner-
directed and never outer directed like many other countries....
There is no other country like this for the religious size, for the
spiritual, the Bhakti Movement...India then has dealings with
God which are peculiar.  

Further, Joshi’s comment regarding the selection of theme in *The
Last Labyrinth* elucidates his stand as a novelist deeply motivated by the
Indian view of life: “There is a special Indian viewpoint which I have
known all my life”\(^{15}\). Added to these stray realizations, Joshi’s ideas
regarding divine will, soul freedom of spirit, detachment, *karmayoga* and
God meet the thoughts of Hindu existential thinkers:

I believe that the soul of man is immortal but there is this Indian
belief that the soul is born again and again basically for the
evolution of the soul, always under certain conditions. They are
where your own life has aligned with the divine will. This is also
called *yoga*.  

Later in the same interview he elaborates his concept of individual
freedom:

I guess freedom (or liberty if you like), which is both political and
spiritual, I have not much dealt with. But the inner-liberation and
the outer-liberation I guess are quite important to me. So inner
liberation without detachment is not possible and selfishness is
always stopping you from getting liberated. Loneliness is the
state where you become aware that you are not liberated and
you also not know how to get liberated. That is the loneliness
stage in man’s life.  

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Joshi is at pains to realize that modern man has lost his faith in God and become a slave to the money-machine culture. For him, human life is an agonizing pilgrimage in which man strives to be an instrument of God. When asked regarding the ways to achieve affirmation in human life, he observes:

A stage comes in your evolution when you can do without rules. But that person is an instrument of God... there is a long journey before you can reach that stage so that only a few people are inclined to do that. There will be a time again when people will turn towards the divine and want to become instrument of God, rather that living for themselves. They will have problems because it is difficult to judge whether you are instrument of God or not.18

All these statements show the deep influences of the Bhagvadgita, Vedanta and the Upanishads on Arun Josh’s psyche. By employing Indian myths, customs and religious beliefs, Joshi seems to be approximating what C. G. Jung calls the “racial unconscious” or collective unconscious that has been constantly guiding writers like Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan and other Indian writers.

It would be quite pertinent at this stage to linger awhile on the major concerns of the Hindu scriptures, which are at the root of Arun Joshi’s creative art. In the philosophy of Vedanta, the Upanishads and the Gita, the most widely discussed subject is the relation between Brahman
and Atman. Atman is individual self whereas Brahman represents the Almighty. The highest wisdom that everybody would cherish to attain is to know the self. In the Upanishads, human being is never an isolated individual but is related to the Absolute and also to fellow beings as the noted philosopher S. Radhakrishnan comments: “The human being has its root in the invisible though in his life it belongs to the passing stream of the visible”.\textsuperscript{19} The individual souls are different expressions of the One Universal Self, Brahman. Through Brahman and Atman are used interchangeably, the former denotes the substratum of the universe while the latter, the substratum of individual egos. Prajapati in Chandogya Upanishad describes the real meaning of the self of Indra:

Dear Indra! The body is not the self, though it exists for the self...The self is universal, immanent as well as transcendent. The whole universe lives and moves and breathes in it. It is immortal, self-luminous, self proved and beyond doubts and denials, as the very principles which marks all doubts, denials and thoughts possible.\textsuperscript{20}

In another Upanishad, Brihadaranyaka, the sage Yajnavalkya declares that the self is the ultimate knower and hence cannot be know as an object because it knows all objects.\textsuperscript{21} The relation between Brahman and Atman (Self) is illustrated in Swetaswataра Upanishad as “Two Birds, companions, always united, cling to the self same tree. Of these
two one eats the sweet fruit, and the other looks on without eating”.
Hence the former is the empirical self and the latter the transcendental
self. One who achieves this wisdom is a liberated soul, a perfect sage.
The Bhagavadgita describes this knowledge of the evolution of the soul
essential for a liberated man: “As the soul passes in this body through
childhood, youth and age, even so is taking on of another body. The sage
is not perplexed by this”. While the liberated souls know the truth and
live in it, the unelaborated ones pass from birth to birth, tied by the
bondage of works.

Man’s access to liberation is through knowledge (jnana). It is
ignorance (avidya) that stands in the way of enlightenment. Avidya breeds
pride (ahankar) and he believes himself to be a separate entity unrelated
to Brahman. In the Upanishads, as well as in Joshi’s novels, faith in God is
the first step towards man’s liberation that exterminates avidya and
ahankar. Much learning also may not be of use unless one has a right
disposition. Those who live on the surface of life, may not feel the agony,
the denial of spirit and may not have any urge to be liberated. The
Bhagavadgita calls them purushapasu (human animals), but those who
realize their dignity as men strive to seek their harmony with the divine
will.
The Hindu scriptures describe three different ways to attain the state of liberation and Arun Joshi has used it in different novels. These are Jnananyoga (a knowledge of the reality), Bhaktiyoga (adoration and love of the Supreme Person), and Karmayoga (subjection to the will of the Divine purpode). These can be differentiated on account of the distribution of emphasis on theoretical, emotional and practical purposes due to difference in human dispositions. At the end, knowledge, love and action mingle together. Jnanyoga lifts man out of his narrow limits and makes him forget his ego in the contemplation of the universal principles of God. His desires cease and he abstains from indulging in general human weakness. The way of devotion (Bhaktiyoga) asks for total devotion and the formation of a relationship of trust and love to God. Bhakti is to believe in God, to love Him, to be devoted to him, to enter into Him. Such a devotee has in him the highest knowledge of a perfect man. Karmayoga is a mandate for action. At the beginning of Gita, Arjuna refuses to fight and asks for abstention of karma and retreat from the world. The Samkhya, which is another name for jnana, requires us to renounce action. It believes that beings are bound by karma or action and saved by knowledge. The Gita compares both these ideologies and concludes that action (karma) is better than renunciation: “The renunciation of works and their unselfish performance both lead to the soul’s salvation. But of
the two, the unselfish performance of works is better than their renunciation". All these three ways of life find their expression in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, The Apprentice* and *The Foreigner* respectively.

The concept of *Maya* in Hindu scriptures has also affected Joshi a lot. His protagonists find their life a sort of labyrinth (*bhulbhulaiya*) from which it is difficult to find a way out. *Swetaswatara Upanishad* conceives God as *mayin*, the powerful being who creates the world by His powers. *Maya* is the power of the lord from which the world arises. The creation has a tendency to delude us into thinking that it is all and the delusive character of the world is *Maya*. The notion of *Maya* has its palpable impact on *The Last Labyrinth*. Joshi brings forth the myth of *sristi* and *pralaya* in his last novels *The City And The River* and suggests man’s surrender to the Divine Will as the ultimate solution in the modern world. It is not only the attributes of these philosophies that are present as an undercurrent in Arun Joshi’s fiction but even the characters discuss at times various philosophies and philosophers as well. There is also a gradual increase in the philosophical mien from novel to novel.

Among other dominant influences on Arun Joshi’s sensibility include the western Existentialist philosophers. In his interview with Purabi Banerjee, Joshi confesses:
I did read Camus and Sartre. I linked The Plague and read The Outsider. I might have been influenced by them. Sartre I did not understand or like. As for existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, I have never understood except odd statements.²⁸

Like the works of modern existential thinkers, Arun Joshi’s novels express the absurdity of man’s existence in modern world but they assert their singularity in applying them in the Indian context and deriving solutions from native milieu.

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that Arun Joshi is a significant novelist of post-Independence phase of Indian literature in English. While deeply rooted in Hindu Scriptures, he has also assimilated Western influences in his creative works, which center around the problem of man to find a meaning of life. His protagonists invariably take plunge into challenging predicaments to assert (and redefine as it were) human dignity. The protagonist of his first novel The Foreigner, Sindi Oberoi and his odyssey, to be taken up in the chapter that follows, evidence that Joshi’s priority was predominantly human situation and its complexities.

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References


15. *Ibid.*, 89


17. *Ibid.*, 91


22. *Ibid.*, 733


24. *Ibid.*, 175


26. Purabi, Banerjee “A Winner’s Secrets,” *The Sunday Statesman*

Calcutta, 27 Feb. 1983,4