CHAPTER IV

EXISTENTIALIST ELEMENTS

IN ARUN JOSHI’S NOVELS

It can undoubtedly be stated that modern man’s life is full of tensions and mental agonies and his existence is in the midst of “a world shattering”(Kingston 3). The very existence of humanity as a whole is under a menace on account of fatal nuclear weapons invented by science. Consequently, there is an atmosphere of envy and unrest, uneasiness and boredom all over the world. Man has lost his human values such as love, joy, pity and peace and he has become more a machine functioning like a computer. There is a gap between what the individual professes and what he really practises, between what he really is and what he should be. These absurd situations give rise to psycho-social disorders and loss of moral values. These negative attributes of human conduct instigate man to commit blunders. Sometimes, deadly sins that ultimately disturb his mental peace and harmony result in discomfort, depression and frustration. Hence he finds himself a misfit. He is alienated from nature, society and even from his own self. These psycho-socio-cultural factors have weighed heavily on the mind and imagination of the writers and thinkers all over the world. They have examined the value and
assumption of the society in which they live. Certain existentialist thinkers have rejected society outright. Sartre considers society as a hell. According to existentialism, the society oppresses the individual. It seeks to control him and impair his freedom. Kierkegaard, the father of modern existentialism, considers every law formulated by society as irrelevant to the inward life of the individual. Victor E. Frankal, the existential psychologist “equates laws of society with those of the concentration camp” (102).

Existentialism, in short, sees the individual as a victim of society and its laws, and advocates the right of the existing person to choose the course of his own life. Jaspers considers the individual as unique in his personal existence and entirely irreplaceable. Martine Heidegger looks upon existence as belonging to the individual alone and to nobody else. Sartre remarks that the first effect of existentialism is “that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders” (Existentialism and Humanism 291). The existential thinkers have also focussed attention on human nature. According to them, there is no settled human nature. Existentialism had its inception as a philosophical tendency or attitude that manifested itself in Europe consequent on the two World Wars. Strictly speaking, it is not a well-knit school of thought. It is a
congruence of views held by like minded people. All existential thinkers seek to justify in some way the freedom and importance of human personality. They all highlight the prominence of human will in contrast to reason. They uphold the view that “each individual person is unique and inexplicable in terms of any metaphysical or scientific system” (Encyclopaedia Britannica 968). Existentialist views were mostly disseminated through novels, plays and essays. The Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is known as the father of existentialism.

Existentialism is basically a situation philosophy, which is also a philosophy of man. The individual man was suppressed and neglected for centuries. The general trend in philosophy was to sacrifice the subjective and intimate concerns of man for the sake of objectivity and universality. Criterion of truth was objectivity and universality. The scope of philosophy and the objectives of science were so confused that attempts were being made to make philosophy more and more scientific. Sometimes, philosophy degenerated to mere academic acrobatics and argumentative gymnastics. Of the philosophers of the past, only Socrates and St. Augustine concentrated on man and his inner being. Scientific advancements are reducing man to a technological worker. Man’s identity is lost in bewildering array of machines he himself had envisaged and forged. Science and technology almost alienated man
from himself and he is converted from person to pronoun and from subject to object. Religion, which till then had been the unflinching source of human dignity, worth and moral guidance was tottering under the impact of rational and scientific theories especially in the wake of the publication of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* in 1859. The robust optimism of the 19th century that the destiny of man is infallibly guaranteed by an infinite force such as reason or mind was gradually crumbling. This break down of the religious traditions of Europe greatly aggravated the growing sense of life’s worthlessness and meaninglessness.

Historical events, particularly, the World Wars unfolded the ugly and horrible face of human existence. Millions were ruthlessly butchered in the World Wars and in the Concentration Camps of Hitler’s Nazi regime as if barbarism and brutality were let loose. The nefarious atrocities and wanton destructions, hunger, poverty, disease and despair unleashed by the Second World War, presented to the modern man a universe that was singularly horrible, illogical and absurd. Second World War was indeed instrumental in orienting the minds of thinkers and writers towards a serious re-evaluation of man’s role in a universe whose meaning and structure were rapidly disintegrating. Modern existentialism has assumed the dimensions of a philosophical movement
of the 20th century, dealing with man’s disillusionment and despair in the context of his struggle for existence. The modern man found himself torn and tortured from within and without by the chaotic condition caused by two world wars. Existentialism insisted on the instability and risk of all human reality. Man is thrown into this world, abandoned to determinism that could render his initiatives impossible. His very freedom is conditioned and hampered by limitations. The negative aspects of existence such as pain, frustration, despair, alienation, anxiety and death became for the existentialists the essential features of human life. Man always experiences an “existential anguish” (angst) and “nausea” upon being confronted with the facts of existence. Existentialist thinkers chose to define and describe the burning human experiences of anxiety, anguish, guilt, dread, despair, alienation, absurdity etc., of the post war world in their own ways. Their findings did exert tremendous influence on the thought pattern of the literary artists all over the world.

Broadly speaking, there are three schools of existentialist philosophers – theistic, atheistic and absurdist. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the father of Modern Existentialism, Karl Jaspers (1883-1962), a German philosopher and Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), a French philosopher, were the exponents of theistic existentialism. The term ‘Existence’ and ‘Existentialism’ were firstly coined and explained by
Kierkegaard himself. He believed that true self-knowledge is realized only with an intensified awareness of God. He proclaimed the Existentialist manifesto: “Subjectivity is Truth”. By subjectivity he meant “the individual’s own experiences of pain, conflict, guilt, anxiety etc., which are usually the results of one’s moral choices”. For him, “Religious faith was a leap into the darkness. Religion is a matter of inward choice involving the leap of faith” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 956).

French existentialism has become probably the best known of all existentialist thinking and in the hands of the French intellectual Jean Paul Sartre, a famous novelist, playwright and philosopher of deep insight, existentialism found its richest treatment. He was a unique expounder of atheistic existentialism on the pattern of Nietzsche. He believes in the supremacy of man’s existence in a godless universe. He writes:

> Atheistic existentialism of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist, there is at least one being whose existence comes before its existence, a being which exists before it can be defined by
any conception of it. That being is man or as Heidegger has it, the human reality”. (*Existentialism and Humanism* 124)

According to Sartre, man makes himself and is responsible for what he is. He asserts: “Man is nothing else, but that which he makes of himself” (40). Human existence is personified anguish and agony. It is characterized by nausea and falseness which make life miserable. Modern man is torn by inner conflict. Life for him is meaningless. In the beginning, man is a kind of existential romantic, but after having experienced the bitter realities in life, he becomes an existentialist. Existentialism, therefore, is a stage in the romantic pursuit of life when man’s agony deepens into anguish.

Albert Camus (1913-60) has developed a kind of existentialism of the Absurd. In his approach he has been described as an ‘anti-theist’ rather than an atheist. He was preoccupied with questions of the nature and meaning of man, his hopes and aspirations. He therefore can be termed a positive humanist. He expresses a feeling, a longing for better life and indicates that man’s kingdom is within him. His slogan is “to create, to transform the humanity of the world into the image of man, to humanize what is inhuman, in short, to civilize” (Bree 3). Verily speaking, Camus regards neither man nor the world as absurd. What is
absurd is the relationship between man and the irrational and incongruous world. Camus’s vision of life is decidedly modern as it bears the style of the age with all its tragedy and turmoil. He is all the time conscious of the terrible absurd forlornness of man. He remarks: “In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land” (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 343). When the world was almost torn into pieces by the chaotic conditions generated by the two World Wars, existentialism, obviously enough, flourished on the continent as a philosophical movement. The post war world marked the age of anxiety, anguish, disillusionment, estrangement, boredom, loneliness, alienation, guilt, dread, despair, death etc.. These existentialist emotions had the compelling effect on the life and thought of literary artists all over the world. Hence, writers of repute like Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, Eugine Ionesco, Proust, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, T. S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, William Golding, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and many others all over the world gave vent to the existentialist themes in their great works.

The earliest Indian novelists like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Kamala Markandaya and a few others depicted Indian life in its entire
socio-cultural, economic and political milieu. After 1950’s, however, the Indian English fiction like its western counterpart, shifted its focus from the public to the private sphere. The novelists’ interest is driven towards delineating the individual quest for the self in all its varied and complex forms. Arun Joshi’s speciality lies in unravelling diverse facets of crisis in modern man’s life. He has the potentiality to give proper shape and form of fiction to the chaos in the mind of a contemporary man and to correlate it to human condition. His technique of self introspection intensified by self-mockery opens a new dimension in the art of Indian English fiction. It is because of his novelty of approach, his psychological understanding of the inner workings of the mind and his philosophical existentialist vision that one gets enamoured of Joshi’s writings.

There are a number of influences that have worked on Arun Joshi. First and foremost, he is well aware of having been influenced by existentialist writers in general and Albert Camus in particular. Joshi himself admits in an interview with Purabi Bannerji: “I did read Camus and Sartre, I liked The Plague and read The Outsider: I might have been influenced by them. Sartre, I did not understand clearly or like. As for existentialist philosophers like Kierkegaard, I have never understood anything except odd statements” (Bannerji, Feb, 1983, 4). A typical
The protagonist of modern fiction is a split-personality, locked up into Hamletian dilemma. He is a tortured soul who always finds himself in a tragic mess. Much of modern fiction is either an existentialist fable or psychic drama. It is the inner crisis of the modern man that has occupied Arun Joshi’s primary interest in his novels that are built around the dark and dismal experiences of the soul. Just after Joshi received the 1983 Sahitya Akademi Award for his fourth novel, *The Last Labyrinth* he told his interviewer Sujatha Mathai that the urge that led him to writing was the “exploration of that mysterious underworld, which is the human soul and its lonely journey through a world where it is necessarily a stranger, a foreigner” (July 9 1983, 4). He frankly acknowledged the influence of Albert Camus, Sartre, Kierkegaard and other western and eastern existentialists writers in his works. Arun Joshi’s protagonists are “the lost lonely questers” (*Guruprasad* 155).

Existentialism has influenced modern literature. The human existential condition is the perennial stuff of great literature. The basic existentialist categories applicable to literature are contingencies, tragic necessity, unlimited freedom, loneliness and absurdity. The age of existentialism has come into currency in the 20th century, but the idea is as old as literature and philosophy. Traces of it have been found not only in the Biblical writings, but also in Indian philosophical systems. There
is a very pronounced impact of existentialism on Arun Joshi’s writings. All his novels from *The Foreigner* to *The City and the River* have in them an undercurrent of the existentialist philosophy. *The Foreigner* is a study of the alienation in the soul of Sindi Oberoi. The crisis of his identity is concerned neither with geography nor with roots. It lies within him and leads him from crisis to crisis. In it, Joshi also explains some of men’s perennial dualities. The way out of these lies at last in the philosophy of attachment Vs. non-attachment borrowed from the Bhagawad Gita.

As far as Sindi in *The Foreigner* is concerned, his life is a study in rootlessness. He is hardly Indian and this fact keeps on haunting him. Being orphaned, he is brought up by his uncle who settled in Kenya. He grows up without any family ties and without belonging to any country. Though Sindi had never to suffer the pangs of poverty, he felt starved of the parental love and on many occasions was compelled to think of the absurdity of his existence. H.M. Prasad comments: “Denied of love, familial nourishment and cultural roots, he grows with a built-in fissure in his personality and becomes a wandering alien, rootless like Naipaul’s unanchored souls or *Camus’s Outsider*” (*Arun Joshi*, 1985: 29). Sindi is always aware of the fact that he always belongs to no culture and cannot confidently call himself an Indian or American. The more he kept on
flirting with the English ladies and American girls, the more conscious he became of his future existence. Sindi Oberoi thinks of the lonely planet and a sense of pity and frustration engulfs him. He feels himself a foreigner wherever he goes and this is more psychological than physical. He turns out to be a man responsible to none, having no morality, no ambitions and no purpose in life. In the words of O.P. Bhatnagar: “a strong feeling of aloneness and aloofness permeates the entire narrative and provides the necessary texture and structure to the novel” (Arun Joshi’s The Foreigner: A Critique of East and West 13-14).

Arun Joshi who is obsessively concerned with the human predicament explores the human psyche so as to unravel the mystery of the human existence. Like Sartre, Joshi is also primarily concerned with the action that is concrete and directed towards the individual who is free to choose for himself a personal way of life out of nothingness and vacuity around. The individual’s capacity for choice and self-realization is sharply drawn in Joshi’s first novel. Although Sindi Oberoi, the hero cultivates an act of detachment around him, he is basically a person who longs to love and to be loved. In his detached view of life, Sindi is akin to Mersault of Camus’s The Outsider. Sindi has no respect for society, no belief in God or religion. His alienation from his friends and from the people around him causes in him the anxiety of meaninglessness of life.
Like Sartre’s hero, Roquentin, Sindi too experiences a restless feeling of nausea which keeps him restless throughout his life. Sindi, a misfit in the world, sees his mode of living “like a small death” (TF 104). Sindi’s awareness of the meaninglessness of human life in the world accounts for his inauthentic mode of existence. Inauthentic existence is essentially a life of pleasure seeking and it gradually brings forth despair, boredom and unhappiness. In such a state, man ignores his potentiality of being and what pertains is a sense of vacuity, worthlessness and nothingness. In his eagerness to lead a meaningful existence, Sindi lives in a strange world of intense pleasure and almost equally intense pain. While gathering miscellaneous experiences in life, he realizes his mistakes. He understands that his total involvement with the self was the cause of the death of his friend Babu and his sweetheart, June. Moved by remorse, he comes to India and decides to do something meaningful. His philosophy of detachment crumbles down and we find him gradually involved with the world. According to the existentialists, man’s encounter with his existence takes place when he has to choose between the alternatives of authentic and inauthentic existence.

Joshi’s concern in this novel is the individual self, the odyssey of self discovery and the ordeal of acquiring self-knowledge. In Arun Joshi’s works the theme of the social isolation of an individual is not
found as a comic vision of the essential loneliness of man. The confrontation here is of man with the universe, not of the individual with the society. Some of the characters are seen as lonely since they lack communication with other persons and their bewilderment and insignificance are viewed against the backdrop of the illimitable space of the universe in which they are lost. Joshi is at pains to realize that modern man has lost his faith in God and has 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. The existentialist novelists have definitely influenced Arun Joshi’s themes and techniques. Like the heroes of Camus, Sindi in *The Foreigner* passes through the crisis of the present. Like Meurseult, the hero of the novel *The Outsider*, Sindi is also anti-ambitious and detached which he seems to cultivate as a virtue. The novel deals with the problem of involvement and detachment from the world and lack of courage to face the bitter realities of life. Sindi’s alienation from the world is similar to the one that many existentialist heroes in the West suffer from. The novel is an enactment of the crisis of the modern man in the story of Sindi Oberoi. Sindi’s rootlessness is rooted within his soul like an ancient curse and drives him from crisis to crisis. Sindi is trapped in his loneliness which is accelerated by his withdrawal from the society around him. He mulls
over his foreignness which is almost Kierkegaardian. Sindi leaves the impression of being an alien on all those whom he meets. Actually Sindi is incapable of emotional involvement with his social milieu. He is a born “foreigner and is an alien everywhere physically as well as metaphorically’ (Mukherjee 50). Sindi is a foreigner everywhere, in Nairobi, in India and even in America, as he himself puts it: “And yet all shores are alien when you do not belong everywhere” (TF 92). Like Camus’s * Outsider*, Sindi is spiritually sterile as he himself is devoid of any religion and faith. His total alienation and isolation make him what he is; cynical and frustrated. Sindi’s rootlessness takes him from Kenya to London and thereafter to Boston and finally to New Delhi. As R.S. Pathak opines: “His existential drifting over the surface of the earth and his experimentation with self only intensify his dismal loneliness and acute sense of meaninglessness of life” (*Quest for Meaning in Arun Joshi’s Novels*, 1992:44).

Sindi meets a number of women and enjoys sex with them. He happens to meet Anna, a woman of “about thirty five with dark hair and finely chiselled features” (TF 176). She is “a minor artist who had separated from her husband’(TF 176). He has a love affair with her and comes to know in due course that “Anna was not yearning for me or anybody, but for her lost youth”(TF 177).She knows that she has fallen
flat in love with him, but his response is languid and listless: “We carried on like this for six months. I think she loved me intensely and unselfishly. I enjoyed making love to her and her sadness attracted me, but engrossed as I was with my own self, I couldn’t return her love” (TF 177). Anna knows that it is her age that discourages him. It is at one of her own parties that he meets Kathy and is drawn towards her. “I left her (Anna), the moment Kathy showed interest in me” (TF 144). He gets deeply involved with Kathy, an English house-wife who hungers for adulterous love. But Kathy, in turn, leaves him after carrying on with him for a few weeks and goes back to her husband for the sacredness of marriage. The more Sindi kept on flirting with the English ladies and American girls, the more conscious he became of his futile existence. He creates an illusion that he has learnt detachment. It so happens that one morning, it comes to him in a flash: “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” (TF 180). He is of the view that “one should be able to detach oneself from the object of one’s love” (TF 171).

Sindi’s meeting with June turns out to be a turning point in his life. She loves Sindi intensely and has sex with him. Repeatedly, she requests him to marry her. But his cold ‘detachment’ alienates June from
him and paves the way for her to fall on Babu, Sindi’s friend. Truly speaking, the man she really loves is Sindi. She affirms: “You are beautiful Sindi, beautiful as a God. I don’t think I can even stop loving you” (TF 182). Her love of Babu is merely a stop-gap arrangement; it is only on ad-hoc basis. Having come to know that June is still sleeping with Sindi, Babu is shocked and commits suicide by involving himself in a motor accident. Later, when June comes to know herself pregnant by Babu and he being no more alive, she feels utterly disappointed. She then undergoes an abortion surgery during which she dies. Sindi ruminates over his own role in bringing about the untimely demise of both Babu and June. He feels that: “Nothing even seems real to me, leave alone permanent. Nothing seems to be very important” (TF 113). Like a man faced with the existential despair, he thinks that “Death wipes out everything, for most of us any way. All that is left is a big mocking zero” (TF 114). To him “Good things and bad things appear to be the same in the long run of existence” (TF 114). He seems to be conscious of the meaninglessness of human life. Sindi’s early response to June’s proposal of marriage only heightens the absurdity of human situation and proves his act absurd in line with the heroes of existentialist writers like Sartre, Camus, Ionesco, Pinter and a few others.
The death of June and Babu makes Sindi restless, further rootless and lonely, drifting into the meaningless uncertainties about life and existence and “the abominable absurdity of the world” (TF 202). On his return to India, Sindi joins the Khemka Industries. There he undergoes a series of innumerable experiences. His existentialist quest simply adds to his loneliness and meaninglessness of life. A fresh crisis comes in the life of Sindi when Mr. Khemka is sentenced to jail for playing fraud with income tax accounts. The workers of the firm persuaded Sindi to take over the charge of Khemka’s business and save them from starvation. It is at this critical juncture that we find Sindi becoming wiser. He decides to work for the welfare of the poor workers. It is Muthu who becomes instrumental in effecting a transformation in Sindi. Mohan Jha rightly remarks:

It is the nature of human distress and suffering of which Muthu, among others, is a living image, that drives him from detachment to involvement, from indifference to participation, from neutrality to commitment and as Muthu says and Sindi sees, detachment consists in getting involved with the world. (172)
Muthu is really a karamayogi. It is from him that Sindi learns the secret of non-attached action or ‘nishkamakarma’ of ‘karmayoga’ as propounded in the Gita. That is “your right is to work only, but never to the fruit thereof. Let not the fruit of action be your object, nor let your attachment be to inaction” (Chapter 11 verse 47). Sindi comes to realize that detachment, in the true sense of the term, should not only be from the world and its objects but also from one’s own self. One can be of some use to others only when one is really detached from one’s own self. Mohan Jha rightly remarks that the change in Sindi’s life from detachment to involvement is certainly “a study in experience” (173).

The novel, no doubt, is full of instances and descriptions that make it read as an existentialist quest to find a meaning in the meaninglessness and absurdity of life. For an insecure man like Sindi, everything is purposeless. He turns out to be a thorough going absurdist to whom this world is full of suffering and life is all disillusionment. The protagonist Sindi is a typical representative of the contemporary man, who irrespective of all sorts of scientific and technological advancements of the modern times, finds himself in a tragic mess. He is a foreigner in the true sense of the term, with all bonds of love and social relationships disintegrated. Hence his life is all hellish and there is no end to his suffering. Sindi’s fallacy of detachment is a mask to cover his inability to
belong to society and people. He finds himself utterly naked in the hands of existence. He moves around the streets of the world with the feeling of loneliness. His agony deepens when he realizes that he has no friends indeed. Sindi, the alienated protagonist finally arrives at peace within and calm around. He settles with the business, with Sheila and above all with himself. Throughout the novel, the idea of foreignness is kept before the reader. The insecurity, remoteness and alienation associated with the word ‘foreignness’ form the entire edifice of the novel that portrays the protagonist’s sense of metaphysical anguish of the meaninglessness and purposelessness of human condition. These existentialist notions have been so cleverly handled by them that the novel is never allowed to have an overdose of philosophy. There is a very pronounced impact of existentialism on Arun Joshi’s writings.

Arun Joshi’s second novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is often described as existentialist in certain aspects. It is concerned with the crisis of self, the problems of identity and the quest for fulfilment. In one of his interviews with Sujatha Mathai, Joshi himself admitted that he was led to writing to explore “that mysterious underworld, which is the human soul” (*Mathai, July 10, 1983:6*). Like the existentialist writers, Joshi is mainly concerned with the man’s feelings of anxiety and alienation at great length. *The strange Case of Billy Biswas* develops the
theme of alienation and anxiety more effectively than the treatment meted out in his first novel, *The Foreigner*. It is meet to quote Iyenkar’s remarks here: “In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Arun Joshi has carried his exploration of the consciousness of helpless and rootless people a stage further and has revealed to our gaze new gas chambers of self-fanged misery’ (1982: 514). Billy’s quest seems to be deeper than that of Sindi. But he is not as uprooted as Sindi is. Unlike Sindi, Billy is born and brought up in a family with a comfortable background.

Billy’s awareness of the deeper layers of his personality makes him an existential being, estranged and alienated from the superficial reality of life. He is in the predicament of an alienated personality who never feels at home in the modern bourgeois society. Billy has a dislike for an organized life. Romi the narrator rightly sums up his impression of Billy: “It was around his interest in the primitive man that his entire life had been organized” (TSCBB 14). His predicament becomes a strange case as he turns out to be a split-personality, split between “primitive” and “civilized”. “His strange case becomes a universal myth of the primitive in the heart of man ever alienating him from the superficial and polished banalities of modern civilization” (Mathur and Rai 145). He finds himself misfit in the civilized world and is in search of a place where he may not feel self-estranged, socially isolated and culturally
uprooted. It is only Tuula Lindgren, the Swedish psychologist who understands the dilemma of Billy’s life. It is she who knows what is going on “in the dark, inscrutable, unsmiling eyes of Billy Biswas” (TSCBB 16). Billy often falls into the fits of hallucinations and out of these hallucinations he comes out “very depressed and really shaken up” (TSCBB 181).

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas’ explores the inner psyche of Billy who is not able to bear with the so-called civilized façade of modern life and as such, he escapes into the unlimited freedom of choice that awaits him in the tribal world. Though born and brought up in an aristocratic family, Billy has a dislike for an organized life. He is filled with virulent hatred for the systematized civilized life which aggravates his problem of identity instead of resolving it. From his early childhood, Billy’s case has been strange. At the age of fourteen he goes to Bhubaneswar, to put it in his own words: “The first thing that hit me about Bhubaneswar was the landscape” (TSCBB 123). One afternoon, he visits Konark, the sculptures at Konark, it seems to him, are capable of giving him a solution to his questions about the problem of his identity. One night he happens to go to the tribal people with his uncle’s chauffeur. With deep interest he watches the tribals dancing, drinking, singing and making love. Extremely sensitive as he is, Billy feels a
strange sensation: “Something similar happened to me then” (TSCBB 124-25). He records the impressions thus:

First a great shock of erotic energy passed through me, although, mind you, there was nothing particularly erotic about the whole business except once when a boy and a girl, their arm around each other, loitered past me gigging and tumbled into the bush beyond. The shock of erotic energy was followed by the same feeling of unreality or as I said, a reality sharper than any I had ever known. It was a bit like having taken a dose of a hallucinatory drug, something I realized many years later when I was in Mexico. I remember saying to myself, even though I was only fourteen, I remember saying something has gone wrong with my life. this is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of. (TSCBB 91)

Billy who is prone to hallucinations tries to overcome it by marrying Meena Chatterji. But with the passage of time, the misunderstanding between him and wife gets the form of the crisis of character. Their relationship gets “stranger and stranger with every passing day” (TSCBB 75). Meena even lodges a complaint with Romi: “… he doesn’t want me
any more. He hasn’t touched me for six months. Not once” (TSCBB 57).

Billy Biswas escapes from the civilized world to the tribal shelter. His escape from the civilized society to the primitive world is not for the sake of becoming a yogi, but because of the phony atmosphere of the modern society. O.P. Bhatnagar rightly points out that Billy “renounced this materialistic society and civilization not to be an ascetic but to fulfill all the demands of his self to the perfection of participated joy” (The Art and Vision of Arun Joshi 144).

With a view to getting the right kind of solace that his injured soul needs, Billy meets Rima Kaul, who has loved him passionately since the day she met him. His passions lead him astray and his romance with Rima Kaul is degraded into seduction. He feels that no woman of this ‘phony society’ can satisfy his soul. Frequent hallucinations and visions of a woman still haunt him. He once wrote to Tuula that a strange woman was crossing his dream and he had seen her on the streets of Delhi nursing a child in the shade of a tree. This incident shows that Billy doesn’t have a hunger for sensual satisfaction. In this context, H.M Prasad comments: “It is a quest for self-realization, for a union with the missing part of his soul” (Arun Joshi 122). Billy is in search of a surrounding that is in harmony with his soul. Billy begins to lose his grip on life and becomes an introvert. As Tapan Kumar Ghosh observes:
“Thus even before his physical disappearance, Billy ceases to belong to the civilized world” (75). Billy who meets Bilasia, the tribal girl, understands that she is the fittest woman to satisfy his soul. His first look at her in Dhunia’s hut is captivating. The oil lamp there is “lending voluptuousness to her full figure until the whole hut seemed to be full of her and only of her” (TSCBB 116). Her presence transforms him altogether. Billy undergoes “his final metamorphosis” (TSCBB 141). Bilasia’s sensuality lures Billy and she is exceedingly attractive sexually. Billy’s union with Bilasia is not only a union of the two separate bodies as in the case with Meena Biswas, or a union of flesh as in case with Rima Kaul, but it is a union of a split-self to realize the whole.

Bilasia, he feels, is the essence of the primeval force: “Bilasia at that moment was the essence of that primitive force that had called me night after night, year after year” (TSCBB 142). Now his love for primitivism becomes a realization: “something grave and decisive happened during those thirty six hours” (TSCBB 144). He relates to Romi the story of his complete metamorphosis. Now Billy knows what he has been really wanting and what he has practically realized. It is primitivism that will lead him to his destination. He knows that his love for primitivism is a step towards his spiritual awareness, his realization of the soul, his existentialist quest for meaning and values in life.
According to the Sankya system of Indian philosophy, evolution takes place when ‘purush’ and ‘prakarit’ come into contact. Bilasia is prakriti and Billy is purush. Prakriti needs purush to enjoy and also to obtain liberation. Prakriti is called shakti. Bilasia is shakti for Billy as Anuradha is for Som Bhaskar in The Last Labyrinth. Only when Billy meets Bilasia and unifies himself with her, he realizes his self and becomes whole.

Bilasia, a woman not as pretty as his wife Meena, but expressing an irresistible primeval eroticism, temptingly attracts the professor of Anthropology who was fascinated by tribal cultures and acts as the first step in his total transformation. Billy’s liberation which again presents existential overtones is triggered by an extremely intense sensual urge. Billy comes to the realization that what he needs is a kind of life in contact with nature and its rhythms, uncontaminated by the stiff rules of a phony society. When four years later, Billy suddenly pops up from the forest to approach his surprised friend Romi, he is again the spontaneous and fascinating talker of the times of their stay in the States. Billy comes to the understanding that he is a kind of man god, an “avatara” to the tribals and a faith of this kind is in tune with the Indian tradition. Billy comes to have certain magic powers. Billy is a man having great power. According to Dhunia, Billy sent a tiger away which had been roaming
the jungle for a week, killing their cattle. Billy cures Romi’s wife Situ of her agonizing chronic migraine by giving her some herb to smell and touching her with a metallic rod. The forest to which Billy escapes is both an agent and a background in which Billy finds himself. He is free of many earthly restraints. It is a world where the subject of discussion is different from that of the civilized world: “…nobody is here interested in the prices of food grains or new seeds or roads or elections and the stuff like that” (TSCBB 83). Discussions would centre around “the supernatural, violent death, trees, earth, rain, dust storms, reverse moods of the forest and dance, singing […] women and sex” (TSCBB 83). The first night with the tribals accomplishes far reaching repercussions in Billy. It brought “catastrophic change” (TSCBB 137), he felt he had “really gone mad” (TSCBB 138).

The incident of Billy’s curing Romi’s wife Situ of her migraine costs Billy his life and gives the story a tragic turn. Billy wants Romi not to disclose his whereabouts to anybody but Situ comes to know the whole of the story and lets Meena and Mrs. Biswas know about Billy’s being alive. Much against the wishes of Romi, Mr. Biswas, a retired ambassador sets the whole govt. machinery moving to trace Billy with an idea “to drag him upto Delhi by force” (TSCBB 207). Mr. Rele, the superintendent of police zealously carries out the search. During one of
the raids on the tribals, a constable is speared to death by Billy. This irritates Mr. Rele who is bent upon nabbing the culprit dead or alive. Despite the collector Romi’s best efforts to avoid the tragedy, Billy is shot dead by “Havildar”. Romi is deeply grieved at Billy’s “end so unbearably tragic” (TSCBB 241) and reflects with extreme remorse and regret: “Gradually it dawned upon us that what we had killed was not a man, not even the son of a “Governor”, but someone for whom our civilized world had no equivalent. It was as though we had killed one of the numerous man-gods of the primitive pantheon” (TSCBB 169). Thus ends the existentialist quest of Billy for values and meaning of life in the material world where none tries to understand his problem even after his death. The protagonist, ultimately, has to pay a heavy price with his life for not conforming to the norms of the so-called civilized society and for daring “to step out of its stifling confines” (TSCBB 240) and the strange case of Billy Biswas had at last been disposed of. It had been disposed of in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers and its true lovers.

Billy’s death “should not be taken as the death of an isolationist but as the triumph of his ideals and principles” (Dwivedi 313). The civilized world is all set out to destroy him. Even Romi, his trusted friend and the only link from civilization that Billy keeps, ultimately
betrays him. Billy’s dying words “you bastards”(TSCBB167) watching his close friend Romi approaching him, are significant and “it is at the same time a direct abuse, an expression of anger at the betrayal of friendship and the meaningless assault of the civilized on his creative privacy”(Srinath, 1976:126). It is Billy’s final verdict on civilization which is not natural but bastardly. His ‘case’ is an interesting psychological case-study for psycho-analysts and psychiatrists. His predicament is psychologically concerned with the inner psyche and “those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul” (TSCBB 8). In short, Arun Joshi in this novel offers a dramatic presentation of the complex character of Billy who in the first part of the novel finds himself rootless and alienated from individuals, society and civilization as such. In the latter part, Billy takes refuge in the world of tribals only when there is no option. It is in the tribal world that he finds his identity and his roots. There he feels established.

To Meenakshi Mukherjee, The Strange Case is “a compelling novel about a strange quest drawing upon myth and folklore to reiterate its elemental concerns” (203). As per the oral tradition of story telling, the novel is a great success as the narrator and audience both share a common mythology. It is interesting to note that the union of Billy and Bilasia is taken as the union of jeevatma and paramatma, the union of
purush and prakriti. The novel fits into the scheme of Indian classics which is nothing, but the collective unconscious of the whole nation. P. Lal rightly remarks: “Without an absorption in the myths of the lands of one’s forefathers, it isn’t even possible to live a meaningful life” (170). All myths are used with a view to bringing out Billy’s experience on the pattern of the Rishis and Mahatmas of the rich Indian heritage.

*The Apprentice* (1974) like its predecessors, *The Foreigner* (1968) and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) probes deeper into the inner consciousness of the individual. *The Apprentice* which is inspired by Albert Camus’s *The Fall* depicts the pitiable plight of the contemporary man “sailing about in a confused society without norms, without directions, without even, perhaps, a purpose” (TA 74). It is a confessional novel wherein the narrator causes the protagonist to unfold the story of his life in the form of an internal monologue. Ratan Rathor, the hero, is a thoroughly existentialist character who conforms to the doctrine that man forms his essence in the course of the life he chooses to live. He is neither rebel like Billy Biswas nor a rootless foreigner like Sindi Oberoi. The novel can be considered as a psychological study into innocence, experience and expiation of the protagonist’s life history.
Like the long confessions of Jan Baptiste Clemence in Camus’s *The Fall*, Ratan Rathor, the protagonist in *The Apprentice* reveals his life story. Ratan is a thoroughly existentialist character who exemplifies the doctrine that man’s salvation depends upon the course of life he chooses to lead. He embodies the very world of material values which his predecessors Sindi and Billy reject. If they are rebels and dissidents, Ratan is a victim. Yet, in spite of the differences, they all are men engaged in the search for a meaning in life. Like the first novel, *The Apprentice* also attacks materialistic values, but with a different strategy. Unlike Billy, Ratan wades through corruption to arrive at an understanding of life and its affirmations. The novel is lost in a series of Browning like monologues addressed to a boy to whom Ratan lays bare the motives, his aspirations and his dilemmas through the stream of consciousness technique. Ratan who had held in his childhood that there were ideals to die for is disillusioned after his father’s death when he realizes that poverty, indifferences of friends and unemployment are the only rewards for his father’s martyrdom. His father’s idealism appears to be stupid and meaningless to Ratan. Devoid of faith, and perceiving the unjust human condition, Ratan can see only disaster and doom lurking behind everything. *The Apprentice* is also an attack upon the post-independence civilization with its scope for lying, hypocrisy, bribery,
drunkenness and womanizing. After his father’s death, Ratan goes from place to place in search of a job, but he meets frustration everywhere. He finds himself miserably alone, disheartened and disillusioned.

Ratan undergoes several humiliating experiences while hunting for a job. His intelligence and education do not come to his rescue. At this point Ratan finds himself in a shocked condition: “…what is more shattering than the breakdown of a faith? [...] what hurts is the collapse of the faith that they destroy […] And then some day proof comes along that nothing is so. This is what hurts (TA 23)”. Within a short time Ratan secures the job of a temporary clerk in the Department of War Purchases. He works “harder than almost anybody in the department except the superintendent himself” (TA 15). With the help of his obedience and docility he wins the confidence of the superintendent who later on confirms his job. His journey as an officer clerk begins and further corruption of his soul is only a matter of time. At times he contemplates like this: “I embarked upon the solemn and relentless pursuit of a career. Bourgeois filth, careers and bourgeois filth […] And to live. One had to make a living. And how was a living to be made except through careers” (TA 39). When Ratan is to choose between the higher ideals of his faith and his instinct for survival in the modern world, he exercises his choice to pursue his material ends on the Sartrean line of existentialist ideology.
Though he rises in life through corrupt practices, he is far from achieving satisfaction. He now owns a car, a flat of his own, a refrigerator and has twenty thousand rupees in the bank. The higher he rises, the more unscrupulous, fraudulent and hypocritical he becomes.

In spite of his promotion and material gains, Ratan does not feel at home in this corrupt society. The tragedy of Ratan lies in his consciousness that practically “has been gradually sinking into the abyss of darkness, of corruption, exploitation and bourgeois faith” (Das 41). Yet he has the satisfaction of swimming, not sinking. Arun Joshi’s ironic comment on this aspect of human existence is worth quoting: “we sink, we think we are swimming” (TA 53). The hopeless mess of life inspires nausea in Ratan. His higher self brings about a change in his behaviour. He frequently recollects his father’s ideals. He begins to behave as if he were one of the greatest patriots of India. With a view to bringing about a change in the existing set up, he also writes an article entitled ‘Crisis of Character’ (TA 51) in which he holds the Indian character mainly responsible for the downfall and decay of the country. He resorts to all sorts of corruption prevailing in our society and describes the Indian people as “a glorious monument in ruin, a monument of which even the foundations had caught canker” (TA 59).
Ratan blames the prevailing atmosphere for his degradation. He finds himself trapped in the corrupt system, “where men were weighed in Money or Power” (TA 62). He becomes obsessed with wealth and sacrifices the principles that have stood in good stead with him during the adolescence. He considers himself a nobody without identity. In the wake of his susceptibility to bribe, he is automatically drawn to wine and woman. Ratan starts visiting prostitutes and later realises that “I was in fact, at the peak of dung heap that I had been climbing my life” (TA 82). He is embarrassed by the old depressing feeling that something had gone wrong with his life. His existence is tormented by the question “why did I take the bribe?” (TA 61) Thereafter Ratan is always at war with himself, the moral dilemma of Ratan is at its climax. He is in a pitiable plight: “I felt only rather depressed, uncomfortable” (TA 66). He further says: “Many things disturbed me but where I had expected new achievements, new standards, there were no standards. No standards at all” (TA 63). Thus the inner conflict displayed in Ratan’s consciousness gives an existentialist dimension to the novel. Becoming painfully aware of having lost an existential substance of life, he like an existentialist, cries out in utter despair: “What had I done, what had I done which I should not have done? What was right? What was wrong? What was the measure of doing things or not doing them? Where were the dividing
lines between success and failure, loyalty and betrayal, love and hate?” (TA 72-73). Joshi beautifully displays the inner discord that lends existentialist stance to the protagonist’s personality. Ratan feels guilty of clearing the sub-standard war materials and thereby ruining so many lives including that of the Brigadier. Here Arun Joshi’s vision is thoroughly existential.

After the bribery episode we come to learn of the return of his Brigadier friend from the fighting fronts of Indo-China war. The war is lost and the Brigadier upon his return from the battle front is suffering from nervous breakdown. When Ratan goes to visit him, he finds the Brigadier terribly shocked and emaciated. The Brigadier is taken to the hospital and admitted in Emergency Ward. It is worth stating that during their childhood days, the Brigadier had saved Ratan’s life when he was attacked by a group of hooligans. As per the order of S. P., Ratan writes his letter of confession. He decides to meet the S.P. in the evening but later on we see that he doesn’t confess at all. In the meantime the Brigadier kills himself by shooting in the head and this incident shakes Ratan to his roots. Ratan deliberates on the entire affair afresh and holds Himmat Singh responsible for his one time benefactor and friend’s death. He goes to the Sheikh to take revenge upon him and charges the latter for seducing him to their coil. On this the Sheikh retorts: “You are
bogus, Ratan Rathor, Bogus. From top to bottom. Your work, your religion, your friendship, your honour, nothing but a pile of dung. Nothing, but poses a bundle of shame” (TA 131). He chides Ratan that one should not blame others for one’s own misdeeds and fallouts. He also explains that Ratan alone has not been responsible for the deal and that there is a big racket involved in the deal, the Secretary and the Minister besides them, and that he has been made a scapegoat only because he is “a spineless flunky”(TA 136). By the revelation of Sheikh, Ratan understands the absurdity of his existence and reflects on his situation “…I saw more of myself that I had seen before. I did not yet know what had happened to me, but one thing was clear: my life had been a great waste” (TA 135).

Although, Ratan has been seeking “solace from the annals of corruption” (TA 142), his dying conscience keeps on pricking him. He always plans to do the right thing, but never does it. “He is caught in the dark labyrinth of life and is unable to follow the light that is within him” (Mathur and Rai 148). Ratan is at times so confused that he fails to differentiate between the right and wrong. With a troubled conscience and a suffering soul, he goes from place to place without finding any peace. Ratan’s visit to the temple to seek peace and solace within and without exposes him to the fact that even religion is not free from
corruption. He meets the priest who is ready to grease Ratan’s palm to save his son who has used substandard material in the construction of some houses and is now put into prison.

The dilemma about God is another existentialist aspect of Ratan’s labyrinthine life which leaves him all the more puzzled. The Sheikh tells Ratan that the crookedness of the society is beyond repair and it may only be removed by ‘revolution’ or ‘God’. He further tells him: “My soul was killed, you put yours to prison. But souls that were pawned could perhaps be retrieved” (TA 146). The words of the Sheikh provide him a light to see into the life of things. He decides to retrieve his pawned soul by putting himself to use. Out of an acute sense of alienation, deep sorrow, utter frustration and a deep sense of guilt, he admits defeat and finds strength in spiritual humility and resignation to the will of God which enable him to find his way out of the labyrinth of life. Arun Joshi’s protagonist, Ratan emerges as a man of affirmation who tries to redeem his honour by becoming an apprentice to his moral and spiritual reconstruction and begins to learn to be good and useful to others. Knowing fully well the follies of his earlier life, he undergoes the most difficult penance for his earlier misdeeds. Every morning before going to the office, he goes to the temple, wipes the shoes of the congregation and begs forgiveness of all those whom he has harmed:
Each morning, before I go to work, I come here. I sit on the steps of the temple and while they pray I wipe the shoes of the congregation. Then, when they are gone, I stand in the doorway. I never enter the temple. I am not concerned with what goes on in there. I stand at the doorstep and I fold my hands, my hands smelling of leather and I say things. Be good I tell myself. Be good. Be decent. Be of use.

(TA 142-43)

The main problem before Ratan is the existentialist one regarding the loss of identity as a human being. This crisis of identity gives rise to certain existentialist situations. He emerges as a lost stranger to whom even his “friends appeared no friendlier than a street full of strangers” (TA 114). His awareness of being alone in this world makes him descend into madness. Now he discovers the truth about his own existence. He himself experiences the futility of human actions. The awareness of stark realities of human existence becomes the measure of Ratan’s achievement in terms of realization that “one must try and not lose heart, not to yield, at any cost, to despair” (TA 143) and that there is nothing wrong to make a second part as it is never too late to mend. With this positive realization, he appears to be an affirmative kind of existential
figure, and the personal value he discovers for himself surely lends meaning to his existence. The novelist purposely and of course, correctly ends his novel with a dawn which is both inward and outward, though it is a cold one: “But no matter. A dawn, after all is a dawn” (TA 144). To sum up, the novel is “a striking study of belief in Karma and purification of the soul and it commends the abiding values of humility and self-purification in human life” (Prasad, 1982:60).

Joshi’s *The Last Labyrinth* explores the dilemma of existence with greater intensity and against a wider backdrop of experiences. It probes into the turbulent inner world of its protagonist Som Bhaskar, a millionaire industrialist, who represents the contemporary phase of the dilemma of modern man groping through the labyrinths of life, existence and reality. The narrator-hero, Som Bhaskar, relates in flashback, the events of his life involving him and another man’s woman named Anuradha, for whose possession, he risks his life and business. His inexorable pursuit of this woman makes him feel that he cannot properly acquire her despite possessing her physically. His pursuit of Anuradha assumes the dimensions of his quest for the meaning of his life, love, God and death, the greatest of all mysteries. Som, a young educated and intelligent industrialist, is married to Geeta, “an extra-ordinary woman” (TLL 11). From his grandfather he inherits his fondness for women and
drink, from his father the scientific interrogative attitude towards the First Cause of everything. Som feels hungry for the joys of life and undergoes new experiences in business and sex. But ironically enough, instead of having a sense of fulfilment, he comes to have a terrible sense of emptiness, voids within and voids without. Som’s insatiable hunger is physical, mental, material and spiritual. He seeks substitute satisfaction in sex, wealth and fame, but grows extremely restless. *The Last Labyrinth* explores the recesses of Som’s mind. “Like Jungian or Pirandellian man, he is full of inner disharmony and is a loose cluster of masks or fragments of identity” (Prasad, 1982:58). From his early childhood, he feels insecure. He is in a Sartrean struggle to authenticate his life.

*The Last Labyrinth* is a continuation of the existential quest dealt with in his earlier novels. It explores the dilemma of existence in the life of Som Bhaskar and his incessant urge to understand the labyrinth of life. Man’s failure to control his weaknesses paves the way for human suffering. The absurdity of existence frightens him and he finds himself in a labyrinth. All this is due to the ignorance of his innate potentialities. When the novel opens, we are acquainted with Som Bhaskar, the protagonist of the novel who becomes a millionaire at the age of twenty five after his father’s death. Though married to a woman of his choice
who has born him two children, he is hardly satisfied with his affluent position. He is haunted by a sense of existential crisis and consequential desires and wants. He tries to satisfy his avenging desires by possession of a business enterprise and a woman named Anuradha. However, his desires knew no satisfaction. His problems get multiplied and he finds the world meaningless. Anuradha finds Som a victim of deep seated scepticism and overwhelming rationalism. Though Som is fascinated by the obsolete world of Anuradha and Aftab, he does not share their faith in the invisible and the mysterious. His two selves do not adhere and he is in a great agony. He becomes a stranger to his wife and children and neglects his companies and even his own health. He feels himself vulnerable to melancholy. He finds his existence meaningless and his life “a labyrinth within labyrinth” (TLL 291). Anuradha exercises an overpowering fascination on Som that she becomes an irresistibly bewitching beauty for him. The relationship between Som and Anuradha is one of the most complex ones in the novel. She gradually acquires the centre stage in Som’s life and he repeatedly goes to Benares to meet her. Lal Haveli attracts him in some mysterious ways. Anuradha becomes a labyrinth herself and Som expects a transparency from her. His marvel at the mysterious and dubious nature of Anuradha is very much illustrated in the following words:
There was a mystery about Anuradha that I had yet to crack. She should have been no more to me than a woman trying to save her lover’s (husband’s?) property. She should have been transparent. Why should she appear mysterious unless, possibly, there was a mystery within me that, in her proximity got somehow stirred, as one tuning fork might stir another. (TLL 89)

We find him puzzled and ill to the extent that all the efforts of his family doctor, Dr. Kashyap (Dr.K) have failed to bring about any change in his life. Som Bhaskar represents the western educated twentieth century man who is experiencing the boredom and meaninglessness of his sceptical existence: “At thirty five, I was a worn out weary man incapable of spontaneous feeling” (TLL 14). In order to find a release from his anguish, Som searches for something other than God which can satisfy him. He becomes a battle ground of contrary things: “Hunger of the body. Hunger of the spirit. You suffer from one or the other or both” (TLL 11).

Som had thought of leading a happy life with his wife and children but they have dwindled into insignificance for him so much so that he doesn’t even mention them in his story. His consultations with
psychiatrists do not help to solve his personal problems. Though he attaches no significance to the recommendations of psychiatrists, he goes to meet Dr. Leela Sabnis with whom Som has an old acquaintance. Som’s meeting with Dr. Leela Sabnis gives a thrust to the theories of various philosophers and thinkers like Freud, Descartes and Spinoza. Though a scholar, she is proud of having been divorced by her husband for her love of books and also of leading a free life. Despite her reading of Freud and American and European philosophers, she is as confused as Som. She prescribes the help of Cartesian philosophy to Som and says: “It is Descartes you need to understand” (TLL 79). Leela Sabnis finds the cause of Som’s problems in his separation of matter from spirit. Som doesn’t find any clue from her discussions about his illusions. To Som she is a muddled creature:

Leela Sabnis was a muddled creature. As muddled as me. Muddled by her ancestry, by marriage, by divorce, by too many books […] Her first words would be “Let me begin where I left off”. And she would begin where she had left off, reeling off diagnosis, half sense, half poppy cock, too much analysis. (TLL 77-78)
While leaving her, Som realizes that Leela has only provided sexual enjoyment for some days. On the spiritual level, his understanding is zero:

In the world of matter we had fed on sex and now we were satiated. In the world of the spirit we still enjoyed conversation. The two worlds, by her lights, did not meet, could not meet […] May be, that was why we feel apart. What I needed, perhaps, was something, somebody, Somewhere in which the two worlds combined.

(TLL 81-82)

Some kind of an existential fatigue has been with Som Bhaskar throughout. Consequently, he develops an aridity of having a sense of frustration and a kind of wry detachment from almost everyone and everything till he encounters Anuradha for the first time. She is the most absorbing inhabitant of the world of labyrinth. Apparently, the novel seems to be Som’s mad pursuit to possess her. But this mad pursuit lends metaphysical dimensions to it as he encounters the mysteries of life, death, love and God. As Tapan Kumar Ghosh says:

Som’s obsession with Anuradha is one of love, a love that does not liberate him and sublimate his desires, as the love
of Bilasia and Billy in *The Strange Case*. It freezes him as he is ego-centric and possessive. Som’s hysterical and relentless pursuit of Anuradha is a tortuous affair that brings him face to face with the mysteries of life, death and God, and constitutes what may be called the nucleus of the story. This complex affair in which the sensuous and the spiritual dimensions are interwoven inextricably, unfolds in an intriguing juxtaposition of locales. (131)

Anuradha is a woman of obscure origin. Her past is a saga of intense suffering and harrowing experiences that have left an indelible mark not only on her body but also on her soul.

It can be analyzed that Som cannot relieve himself from the mesmerizing power of Anuradha. The more he is associated himself with Anuradha, the poorer becomes his relationship with his wife Geeta. He goes for a tour with Geeta to Europe, Australia, and Japan but it is of no avail. Som, being a man of the world, fails to understand the mysterious and labyrinthine world of Anuradha, Aftab and Gargi, where, as Tapan Kumar Gosh says: “Beauty and horror, life and death, sensuality and spiritual ambience, the dancing girls and god-women strangely coexist” (134). He feels that Anuradha is “indispensable” (TLL 121) to him. He
returns to that Haveli and: “We possessed each other with singular ferocity, neither willing to loosen the clasp” (TLL 121).

Gargi advises Som to renounce his pride and selfishness and to accept God as the saviour of mankind. According to her, only a belief in God can give man solace from confusion in this materialistic scenario. In the wake of those revelations made by Gargi, Som feels that he was at mistake and must mend his ways for a full realization of the essence of life. After his meeting with Gargi, Som is completely disarmed and perplexed:

I lay down by the stream, the bundle under my head. Above me the vast canopy of the sky suddenly appeared as though I had never seen it before. I was reminded of Prince Andrew, knocked down like a dummy without firing a shot. He had imagined himself to be ambitious […] lying in the mud, cannon balls flying over him, he had stared at the vast cosmic impersonal dome of the sky and wondered: my God, where have I been all these years. Why had I never looked at the sky before. (TLL 215 - 16)

Throughout his life Som Bhaskar suffers from an inner crisis and as R.S. Pathak writes: “He is apparently at war with himself” (1986:134). In a
nutshell, neither his education nor his wealth brings joy and peace to Som’s mind. Unlike Camus’s Meursalt, Som is not indifferent to what is going on around him. He participates very enthusiastically in the activities he is concerned with. He leaves the Haveli that night only to come back the next morning to claim Anuradha. But to his shock and dismay, Som finds Anuradha missing from the Haveli. He comes to Bombay in a desolate mood and starts to mend his ways. He believes that God shall forgive him for all his sins and arrogance. He pleads to Anuradha in his thoughts:

Anuradha, listen. Listen to me wherever you are. Is there a God where you are. Have you met Him? Does He have a Face? Does He speak? Does He hear? Does He understand the language that we speak? Anuradha, if there is a God and if you have met Him and if He is willing to listen, then, Anuradha, my soul, tell Him, tell this God, to have mercy upon me. Tell him I am weary. Of so many fears; so much doubting. Of this dark earth and this empty heavens. Plead for me, Anuradha. He will listen to you. (TLL 222 – 23)

At this part of the novel, we are given an indication of Som’s spirit and affirmation and the hope that he will remain steadfast in future.
Anuradha is the only ‘shakti’ who can transform Som’s hunger of the body into hunger of the spirit, but Som’s realization can be worked out by Som only.

Som, through his invocation to Anuradha, beseeches her to play the role of an intercessor between God and himself. As far as Som is concerned, his departed mistress has become “the core of his existence, the crystallization of the meaning of his life” (Mathur and Rai 152). Anuradha vows to Gargi that she would give up Som if he is saved. She makes the greatest sacrifice by vanishing from the Lal Haveli when Som pursues her to snatch her away. Som is left staring at the dark sea and he broods: “Was there a mystery into which everything fitted. Reality was so like an ice berg. You never saw the whole of it” (TLL 161). He is a lonely existentialist who has come to realize “that core of loneliness around which all of us are built” (TLL 54). When Joshi portrays Som as a new Indian with a crisis of consciousness, Joshi’s existentialist stance assumes a metaphysical dimension. Som’s dilemma lies deep down in his own self and consciousness. It is not the outer world, the objective reality but the world within, the subjective reality which is essentially the fountain spring of despair and anxiety. Som’s dilemma has crystallized the sociological, psychological and metaphysical dimensions of human existence into Joshi’s unique vision of modern man’s predicament.
Som’s quest for meaning in life turns out to be an exercise in futility. Indeed, he finds his existence to be a void, which worries him. Frustrated by his failure to win Anuradha, he becomes dejected and depressed and even ponders over committing suicide. The novel delineates the disturbances in the psyche of its neurotic protagonist. Som inherits his inclination to womanizing, drinking and sexuality from his grandfather. On the other hand, he gets the impulse to believe and surrender from his mother. In between these two emotions, he becomes a labyrinth. He is torn between the faith and doubt and is helpless in his efforts to explore the possibility of an equation between his colonial consciousness and self realization. Finally Som neglects his business, health and sanity and undergoes varied changes. There is sincere and continuous effort on his part to find satisfactory answer to his inexplicable questions. He is like Abhimanyu in *The Mahabharata* who is not able to come out of the Chakravyuha. Som continues to languish in the Chakravyuha of life and death, reality and illusion, doubt and faith.

Joshi’s maiden novel *The Foreigner* is “one of the most compelling existentialist works of Indian English fiction” (Prasad, 1982:52). Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist is an existentialist character who is concerned with the predicament and miserable condition in life. Although Sindi cultivates an air of detachment around him, he is
basically a person who longs to love and to be loved. Like Sartre’s hero Roquentin, Sindi too experiences a feeling of nausea which keeps him restless all through his life. A misfit in the world, Sindi sees his mode of living like a slow death. Sindi’s awareness of meaninglessness of human life in this world accounts for his inauthentic mode of existence. Other characters in *The Foreigner* like Babu Khemka, June Blythe were also in the grip of existential crisis. Sindi later understands that his total involvement with the self was the cause of his friend Babu’s death and the death of his sweetheart June following the abortion. Overwhelmed by remorse, Sindi comes to India and decides to do something meaningful. His philosophy of detachment crumbles down and we find him gradually involved with the world. According to the existentialists, man’s encounter with his existence takes place when he has to choose between the alternatives of authentic and inauthentic existence.

Unlike Sindi who is always wary of taking decisions, Billy acts with courage and determination until his goal is achieved. Billy hears the voice of his soul and acts accordingly. It is evident that even at the stage of his inauthentic existence, marked by his alienation from the family and from upper class Indian society, Billy has visions of primitive self. He rejects the artificiality and hollowness of the modern sophisticated culture and remains restless and isolated. A stranger to the civilized
world, Billy is not in harmony with his surroundings. Meena, the wife of Billy, is a contrast to him because of disharmony and disproportion regarding their outlook on life. So just like Billy, Meena also confronts diverse problems of existence. Having been accommodated into a tribal world, Billy’s life flows like a smooth running river. When friction and quarrel arise between Billy and Bilasia, his tribal wife, we infer that Bilasia also encounters existential crisis in life. The existential quest of Billy for values and meaning of life in the mad and absurd world ends with his murder by a police squad which was engaged in nabbing Billy alive.

Ratan Rathore in *The Apprentice* has to overcome so many hurdles in the path of his existence. The lifestyle followed by Ratan makes us convinced that life is characterized by chaos and insensitivity. He feels crushed under the growing weight of meaninglessness and isolation. The experience of job hunting makes him realize the cruelty of his existence. What really confines Ratan’s belonging to the middle class is his acceptance of a bribe, an act committed not because he needed the money, but because he cannot think of any reason to refuse it. We have little doubt that Ratan’s friends like Brigadier, Himmat Singh are also victims of existential predicament. Ratan’s wife who is tolerant of his immoral and wicked life virtually suffers the pangs of her existence.
With his positive realization that one should live dedicating himself to the service of mankind, Ratan appears to be an affirmative kind of existential figure and the personal value he discovers for himself surely lends meaning to his existence.

Som Bhaskar’s is a psychosomatic case and consequently he is tormented by his ill-defined hungers which Joshi has described as mystical. Som is caught in the labyrinth of worldly desires. He is a representative of those modernized beings who may have gained the whole world but have lost their souls, their spiritual and cultural moorings. Som, like Billy, is stubborn, self-willed and driven by inner furies. But here the similarity ends. For, Som is heir to all the frailties of the flesh. He is obsessed with money in the tradition of the American tycoon. He is almost cast in the mould of an existentialist hero. Som’s existentialist angst is heightened by the fact that life to him offers no solutions as it does to the boy he meets in the hills. The boy has been looking for pebbles that one can see right through. When Som asks him: “And what if you don’t find the pebble?” (TLL 186). The boy replies: “Even then it is all right” (TLL 186). Som is surprised to find in the boy “another Pascal” (TLL 186). He is depressed to find “that a child so young should have been contaminated in such a manner” (TLL 186).
Some traits of existentialist elements have been with Som right from the very beginning till the end. “The boredom and the fed-up-ness” (TLL 21) of life develops with the development of time. From the very start, he gets tired of the voids within and without that keeps him restless. Much against his wishes, he finds life teeming with troubles and turmoil. The world remains to him “a mysterious world as pretentious and meaningless as the holy bulls of Benares” (TLL 108). He tries his best to know the mystery of the world and the secrets of the universe. He himself says: “Nothing had interested me more than the secrets of the universe” (TLL 129). Being unable to overcome his disillusionment and dejection Som makes a suicidal attempt which is thwarted by the timely intervention of his dear wife Geeta. Modern man who is in the grip of existential crisis and dilemma has always a suicidal tendency.

From the aforementioned details, it can undoubtedly be stated that all the four protagonists of Joshi suffer from existential anguish, feeling of alienation and estrangement from the soul and lack of belongingness. Joshi appears to regard both existential detachment and involvement with self as wrong, as eating into the vitals of both individual and society. With his peculiar psycho-social approach to life, Joshi attacks materialistic values, but with a different strategy. The four sensitive intellectuals Sindi, Billy, Ratan and Som Bhaskar face problems of
existence and as a consequence experience rootlessness. The society which is responsible for shattering their self-image with its confusion of values is no way capable of retrieving their lost self. Though Arun Joshi’s direct contact with the existential movement has to be ruled out, his deep reflection and intellectual probing into human predicament bring him close to the existential writers of the West.