CHAPTER II

THEME OF ALIENATION AND SENSE OF VOID

IN ARUN JOSHI’S NOVELS

Arun Joshi is concerned with the predicament of modern man and is sensitively alive to the various dimensions of pressures, exerted by the complex character and demands of the society in which contemporary man is destined to live. The protagonists of his novels are abject outsiders and stark strangers. The awareness of man’s rootlessness and strangeness and the consequential quest for a meaningful self is the keynote of Joshi’s novels. According to Jasbir Jain, “Joshi’s protagonists are all engaged in the search for meaning in life. They are lonely and ill at ease in the world in which they have to live” (53). His characters are mentally disturbed and filled with despair, self-hatred and self-pity, for they regard themselves as strangers in this physical world. His fiction explores the self and brings to central focus the way in which the self has to assess its alienation from the family and society. Joshi deals with the modern man who has no sense of belonging to society amidst which he lives. He finds his own existence a burden. Fuerlicht gives two alternatives for the present day man with his tragic plight: “Modern man
may either try or adjust to the others, to society, to the system, abdicating his true self or he may strive to keep and develop his individuality and thus alienate himself from society” (41).

The chief concern in this chapter is to examine the sense of alienation and void in the novels of Arun Joshi. Modern man finds himself estranged not only from his fellow men, but also from himself, having nothing to fall back upon in moments of crisis. The malaise of the contemporary man has been greatly aggravated by the spiritual stress and strain which is the hallmark of the modern period. Today’s world has shrunk in spirit, languishing in confusion, frustration, disintegration, disillusionment and meaninglessness. We suffer from a gnawing sense of void and meaninglessness which may be manifest in “the alienation from oneself, from one’s fellow-men and from nature: the awareness that life runs out of one’s hand like sand, and that one will die without having lived that one lives in the midst of plenty and joyless” (Fromm, Erich, et al Zen Buddhism and psychoanalysis-86). The problem of alienation and sense of void are so pervasive that they threaten to corrode every sphere of human life. Man fails to perceive today the very purpose behind life and the relevance of his existence in a hostile world. Notwithstanding unprecedented scientific and technological progress which has immensely enhanced the physical pleasures and comforts, the
contemporary man is doomed to find himself in a tragic mess. The most besetting problems that man faces today are the problems of alienation and sense of void. As Edmund Fuller remarks: “Man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin but from inner problem, a conviction of isolation, randomness and meaninglessness in his way of existence” (3). The injuries inflicted and the scars left on man’s psyche generate a cynical attitude towards the established norms and values and make him grope for the meaning of life.

At present, the concept of alienation and its synonyms have become a pervasive theme in all social sciences. Alienation is a multidimensional phenomenon related to different contexts and disciplines, each contributing to its meaning. It was a term used in the ancient times to denote an insane person; alienation in French means insanity. But with a growing awareness of the human mind’s intricacies, subtler shades of meaning became associated with the word. Hegel and Marx used the word ‘alienation’ in the 19th century to refer not to a state of insanity but to a drastic form of self estrangement. The famous Psychoanalyst Eric Fromm states that “In Marx’s system, alienation is called that condition of man where his own act becomes to him an alien power, standing over and against him, instead of being ruled by him” (The Sane Society 117-118). He popularized the term ‘alienation’
through his ‘Escape from Freedom’ (1941). Ephesians in the Bible remind how man “alienated himself from the life of God through his fall” (Chapter 4:Lines 18).

In Genesis of the Old Testament of the Bible, Cain is considered the archetype of social alienation. Hence the notion is as old as recorded time. Erich Fromm says: “By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself” (The Sane Society 117). In Fromm’s opinion, self-alienation is the most important type of alienation. It is the absence of self-awareness. He considers self-alienation as the condition when one becomes estranged from oneself. The alienated person is out of touch with himself and with any person. After Fromm, many psychoanalysts have analyzed self-alienation and most of them belong to Horney School. Despite ambiguities in their use of the concept of the alienation, both Fromm and Karen Horney regard alienation as an experience in contemporary life. Horney defines self-alienation “as the remoteness from one’s feelings, wishes, beliefs and energies. It is the loss of the feeling of being an active determining force in his own life” (130). Angst, alienation, communication gap, insecurity and futility have crept into the Indian psyche also, though not on the Western proportion. Alienation is a concept existed in India from time immemorial. Three
kinds of alienation were known; from self, from society and from God. In contemporary Indian society, one finds alienated characters emerging because of the social changes that marked Indian society at large.

Many consider self-alienation as the primary stage from which emanate all other alienations. According to some analysts, self-alienation starts in early childhood where there is a lack of physical or emotional intimacy or where the parents are over-anxious or overambitious. Social alienation is an equally significant aspect of alienation. It results from the sense of estrangement brought out by the sudden discovery that the social system is either oppressive or incompatible with the desires and ideals of individuals. Self alienation seems to have worse effects on an individual than social alienation. The former is the more basic form of rootlessness and can thwart an individual’s mental and psychic development in an alarming manner. In sociology the term alienation is used with reference to man’s profession and his relation with others. The loneliness arising out of the lack of significant relation with others in sociological view is called social isolation. Among the writers who have sought to address this problem, one of the most outstandingly sensitive and thought-provoking is Arun Joshi. Alienation is obviously, as Meenakshi Mukherjee has asserted “a very common theme in the Indo-English novel” (83). Alienation forms the subject of many psychological
and philosophical studies. It is this human problem that has occupied the primary interest of both Anita Desai and Arun Joshi.

In their writings, Poets like Eliot and Yeats also gave vent to their spiritual anguish at being shaken by the growing mechanization and deteriorating value system. The American writers who represented a rootless culture also were obsessed with the theme of alienation. Eugene O’Neill portrays Americans as both estranged from society and alienated from themselves. The social and cultural contexts are also characterized by racial discrimination, tense marital conflicts resulting from inter-racial relationships or even due to migrations leading to disillusionment. The cultural alienation experienced by the Canadian psyche is articulated in Margret Atwood’s writings: “We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely and in the parts unknown to us, we move in fear, exiles and invaders” (62). Indo English writing also presents us with similar instances projecting the predicament of modern man. Anita Desai’s fist novel *Cry the Peacock* highlights the husband-wife alienation theme by unfolding the relationship of Maya and Gautama. The alienation of Maya is rooted essentially in Gautama’s philosophical detachment. For her “everything is only a dream, an illusion” (172).
Nizzim Ezekiel’s alienation arises from his destiny to live in India with a Jewish heritage among Hindus.

In discussing the theme of alienation in Arun Joshi’s novels, we are mainly concerned first with man’s self alienation which is the most prevalent kind of alienation and secondly his alienation from his own society. 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. Arun Joshi’s recurrent theme is alienation in different aspects and his heroes are self-centered persons prone to self-pity and escapism. In spite of their weaknesses, they are however, genuine seekers who strive to grope towards a purpose in life and self-fulfilment. In his novels, Joshi attempts to deal with the various facets of the theme of alienation in relation to self, the society around and humanity at large. Joshi’s novels have been labelled as dealing with the theme of anxiety, alienation and the predicament of modern man. His books highlight the growing extent of alienation that appears in contemporary India among the youth, the intellectuals and the artists. To a certain extent, his fiction is a voice of this alienated group. Joshi’s heroes “exemplify the existential dilemma of the present day world and bring out the form and pressure of complex society in which modern man is destined to live” (Devi 627).
Arun Joshi’s fiction is filled with the people who are alienated from themselves, from God and society. His fiction is a sincere effort to analyze his unique way of handling the theme of alienation. An attempt is made here to examine how best Arun Joshi tackles the problem of alienation in the modern Indian context. Almost all of Joshi’s heroes are alienated beings. Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner* is alienated from society and Billy Biswas in ‘*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*’ is alienated from civilized world and his own family. Ratan Rathor in the *The Apprentice* reconciles himself to the world, but in the process becomes alienated from his family, his friends and even his own self. ‘*The Last Labyrinth*’ deals with the theme of alienation that simply presents the hollowness of modern aristocratic world. Som Bhaskar, the protagonist, represents the contemporary western educated young men who while feverishly searching for their roots, discover in the process, emptiness and void. The four sensitive intellectuals, Sindi, Billy, Ratan and Bhaskar face problems of alienation. They lose their inner harmony and as a consequence experience rootlessness and alienation. The predicament of modern man caught in the labyrinth of psychological problems and philosophical issues, is the central theme in Arun Joshi’s fiction. In his fiction, the protagonist is often in search of his true self. All the protagonists of Arun Joshi are alienated introverts and pilgrims in pursuit
of the meaning of life. Joshi deals with various heroes and in that process brings out the multi-faceted personalities of the protagonists.

What distinguishes Joshi from other prominent writers of the period is his sincere attempt to probe deep into the intricate working of the human mind and honest efforts to find a positive solution to its problems. It would be relevant to remember the thought provoking comment made by Dr. Radhakrishnan in this context:

The sufferings of man, his disillusionment and sense of rootlessness, all are the result of a conflict in us […] the only discipline which helps us to change ourselves is religion which is nothing but man’s total conscious attitude towards life found and enlightened by knowledge. (The Present Crisis of Faith 36)

All the same, Dr. S Radhakrishnan holds that the sense of void and the problem of meaninglessness cannot be solved by religious faith alone. Only reasoned faith can give coherence to life and thought. This theory has been the inspiration behind the present study of Joshi’s fiction which is a sincere effort to analyze the unique way of handling the theme of the problems of the self. The pervasive sense of void and meaninglessness is the most dominant feature of the human condition in
the contemporary epoch. It is a realization of what Frank Johnson calls “fractionated function that is responsible for one’s felt insignificance of life and its affairs” (46). The plight of modern man has been discussed by Seeman under a set of five interrelated operational conditions, viz, powerlessness, normlessness, isolation, self-estrangement and meaninglessness, which he considers to be different manifestations of alienation. He analyzes the search for meaning in terms of the increase of functional nationality and the concomitant decline of “substantial relationship” (786).

The various symptoms of alienation: powerlessness meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, self-estrangement and isolation are all revealed in the novels of Arun Joshi. Arun Joshi’s maiden novel *The Foreigner* (1968) explores in depth the problem of Sindi Oberoi’s sense of void and alienation at being unable to find a meaning in existence. Sindi finds himself in the predicament of an outsider. In the review of the novel, Meenakshi Mukharjee describes the hero of ‘*The Foreigner*’ as a ‘perennial outsider’ (22). Sindi’s parentage and early life made him an ideal foreigner, the man who did not belong anywhere. Sindi who was born in Kenya of an Indian father and an English mother lost his parents at an early age. He had early education in Kenya, later in England and finally in America. It was by chance that he
came to India. Thus he was one who did not have his roots anywhere in the world:

I wondered in what way, if any did I belong to the world that roared beneath my apartment window. Somebody had begotten me without a purpose and so far I had lived without a purpose, unless you could call the search for peace a purpose. Perhaps I felt like that because I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if I had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter! It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner. My foreignness lay within me and I couldn’t leave myself behind wherever I went. (TF 55)

He felt an alien who did not belong to any place, and his words and behaviour created the same impression in those with whom he came to contact. June, a student in America with whom he came into close contact remarked “I have a feeling you’d be foreigner everywhere” (TF 29). A person, as alienated and rootless as Sindi was bound to become cynical, misogynistic and detached. Babu’s sister Sheila once told him “You are the saddest man I have ever known” (TF 140). Sindi himself confessed “I was cynical and exhausted, grown old before my time,
weary with my own loneliness” (TF 31). In the course of his search for meaning and purpose of life, Sindi suffers a lot. Sindi’s alienation from the world is similar to the one that many existential heroes in the world suffer from. The novel is an enactment of the crisis of the present. He is an existential character: “rootless, restless, and luckless, in a mad, bad and absurd world” (Guruprasad 152). Sindi himself becomes aware of the necessity of the proper social life for him.

In his eagerness to find out the meaning of life, Sindi lives in a strange world of intense pleasure and almost equally intense pain. Sindi’s sufferings are manifestation of a spiritual crisis which all sensitive people are likely to face today. He wants peace, a capacity to love and the courage to live “without desire and attachment” (TF 120). Sindi’s attitude to life and love is in total disregard of the values of human relations, which leads to his obsession with non-involvement. As Asnani puts it: “Pleasure without involvement and love without possession are the values that condition the attitude and overall vision of Sindi” (1978:45). Sindi’s foreign background stood against him. June remarks on his foreignness: “There is something strange about you, you know. Something distant. I’d guess that when people are with you they don’t feel like they’re with a human being. May be it’s an Indian characteristic” (TF 29).
Sindi’s sense of alienation and void chiefly results from his life of detachment. He is extra cautious not to be involved with anybody so that he can escape from all harsh realities in life. Sindi has misconstrued the term detachment. His utter selfish notion of detachment is just a euphemism for non-involvement and thus shirks the most needed responsibility towards June. As S. Rengachari aptly observes: “Detachment which he clings to with perverse obstinacy, misconstruing the lofty concept in a manner suiting his awareness, is a euphemism for self isolation, callous indifference, gross selfishness and inhuman passivity” (12). Actually Sindi wants to love and be loved but fears commitment owing to his inherent cowardice: “The real Sindi is not of the cynical image he wishes to project, the real Sindi is not lonely individual wanting to love and be loved, but afraid of committing himself” (Jain 53). Sindi’s negative attitude to life brings June close to Babu, the Indian student. Babu is also a man who is not free from sense of void and alienation. His poor performance in university exams and his inability to adjust with others add to his alienation and sense of void. June’s alienation results from the wrong choices of men in her life.

Sindi who is devoid of emotions only travelled now and then in the dream world of June and Babu. In fact he fails to console either Babu or June. He can’t love anybody except himself. The idea of offering
marriage to June does not enter his mind as the only solution to her as well as his own problems. Instead, he remains aloof and alienated from passions and desires as a typical existential hero. Even after deciding to marry Babu, June would go to Sindi for consolation and practical advice. This really sowed the seeds of suspicion in Babu. Having realized that June was unfaithful to him, Babu gets shocked and stunned and accuses June of having illicit relationship with Sindi. In a fit of fury and tension, Babu drives off his car roughly and is killed in suicidal accident. Sindi feels with a remorseful touch that he himself is responsible for the death of Babu. Like the characters in the novels of Kafka, he suffers from a sense of guilt which is yet another manifestation of the problem of alienation. He explains the shocking experience thus:

Babu’s death had drained something out of me. It was my confidence in the world. At one blow, most of what I had cherished in life was taken away […] Babu had kicked out all my beliefs and disproved my theories. I felt like a desert or like a vast field of naked oaks in winter time. I felt more alone and naked in the world than I had ever felt before. (TF 149)
As K. Radha aptly observes: “Sindi and June know that Babu had really committed suicide. He has been sent out of his college as he had failed in all his examinations. He has been disowned by his father for intending to marry June. And on top of it all comes June’s tragic death” (111). The unexpected and untimely death of Babu and June enhances Sindi’s feeling of alienation and persuades him to decide on leaving America. He remarks thus of his feelings of frustration and alienation in America:

   The feeling of my nakedness in the hands of existence grew with every passing day and a strong urge possessed me to once again roam the streets of the world. I didn’t know where I would go or what the future held for me, but one thing was certain: my search had to continue. (TF 149)

Sindi’s predicament is a tangible reflection of the modern man’s condition.

   The severest blow to Sindi is the death of June which occurred while trying to abort Babu’s child. This incident gives him another insight into the mystery of existence. He realizes the absurdity of his theory of detachment which had caused the death of two persons intimate to him. He reminisces: “Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it” (TF 162).
Sindi’s utter confusion and agony coupled with his prick of conscience and sense of remorse are evidently manifested in the following words.

In short I was seized with the problem of once again putting together all that had happened to me and coming to grips with life. For twenty years I had moved whichever way life had led me. I had learnt much on the way. I had learnt to be detached from the world, but not from myself. That is when the fatal error was made that ultimately led to Babu’s death and then to June’s death. (TF 165)

For the past twenty years, he had learnt to be detached from the world but not from himself. That was his fatal error. In this aspect Sindi is a contrast to the protagonist of Joshi’s another novel *The Apprentice* and even to Meursault in Camus’s *The Outsider* who are both alienated from themselves. Thus with the new knowledge regarding detachment, Sindi resumes his journey like the barren woman in Eliot’s *The Wasteland* who wanders over the heaps of ruined towers. Sindi’s is a ruined soul wandering through the dark labyrinths “of life which reminds one of that core of loneliness around which all of us are built” (TLL 54). Sindi is just a fictional representative of the uprooted angry young men of the modern age divided against themselves. Following the death of June,
Sindi’s agonizing sense of void and loneliness deepens when he realizes that he had no friends. Vyvyan Richards in his *Person Fulfilled* rightly remarks: “Isolation and neglect are men’s hell, fellowship his heaven” (37).

To the credit of Sindi, it must be said that he is not an inhuman monster bereft of all emotions and denuded of all human values and virtues. Sindi shows his capacity for regeneration; some pity still resides in the deep recesses of his mind. The basic substratum of human consideration for others, which has been lying dormant in him and which has surfaced on very few occasions is ignited by Muthu, an ordinary worker in Mr. Khemka’s factory. When after an income tax raid, Mr. Khemka is under a trial and there are rumours of his firm being confiscated by the government, Muthu requests Sindi to take over the office for the sake of the poor people. The heroic struggle of Muthu to support his own family and the family of his own brother, who is unemployed, opens Sindi’s eyes and enables him to understand the real meaning of life. Muthu, an almost uneducated person in comparison to Sindi, teaches him the distinction between detachment and involvement. Muthu tells sindi: “Sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved” (TF 188). After his meeting with Muthu, a major change is discernible in Sindi’s attitude towards the real pursuit of human life. He
shows a positive attitude to various situations and problems in life. His search for the meaning of life comes to an end and engages himself in the battle of survival which the workers of the factory could not have won without his help and guidance. He decides to infuse new life into the ruined business of Mr.Khemka and thus uplifts the employees who earn the daily bread of their families. Such an enlightened attitude of Sindi not only minimizes psychic conflict arising out of the feelings of loneliness and worthlessness but also creates one of the deepest forms of human happiness and shared enjoyment. Sindi can be considered as the first among Joshi’s alienated foreigners who turn inwards to overcome their sense of futility and discern a world of meaningful relatedness within themselves, however limited it may be.

Joshi’s second novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* deals with the predicament of the alienated personality of its title hero Billy Biswas. Billy, the son of a Supreme Court Judge, by nature is obsessed with a sense of alienation from the human civilization. He feels an emptiness within himself as much as he tries to attune himself to the civilized society. He finds himself engulfed by a vacuum surrounded by lifeless shadows. He realizes the futility of living among men whose only aim in life is making and spending money. Billy’s predicament is a special case when we come to know that Billy was a split-personality, split between
primitive and civilized. Realizing the shallowness of civilization and the superficiality of its sense of values both in the United States and in India, Billy himself feels alienated from the society, his friends, his parents, his wife and partly from his own true nature. Billy’s case is actually much different from Sindi’s. Unlike Sindi, he hails “from the upper-crust of Indian society” (TSCBB 9). After gaining Ph.D in anthropology, he becomes a lecturer at Delhi University. Despite having such a background, he is ill at ease in so-called civilized set-up of society and is much interested in exploring his inner being. As Romi, the narrator, remarks:

If life’s meaning lies not only in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions, but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun, then I do not know of any man who sought it more doggedly and, having received a signal, abandoned himself so recklessly to its call. (TSCBB 8)

*The Strange Case*, the most moving novel of Arun Joshi also tells a tale of struggle, tension and conflict. Here again, we find the novelist rejoining in men’s capacity to endure alienation and find affirmation of life’s purpose by finding a solution to their tormenting problem. We also
find here the articulation of tensions as well as the difficult choices made by men to overcome them.

Though in this novel too, the dominant motif is alienation, the state of the protagonist is different from the protagonists of the other novels of Arun Joshi. Unlike Sindi, who is wary of action, Billy is a man of action and conviction. His unquenchable urge to choose a primitive life is evident from the very beginning. Billy is haunted by the awareness that the thirst for power, wealth, fame, etc., is meaningless. Billy is unique in the sense that he shows the courage to renounce such a materialistic society which tried to entrap him. He opts for a primitive world which offers some meaning to his alienated soul. Like Joshi’s most other protagonists, Billy was born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth, as the son of a Supreme Court Judge in India. Billy’s exploration of his real inner being makes him an existentialist being, estranged and alienated, and never feels at home in the bourgeois society.

Billy is extraordinarily sensitive, even after having roots he feels alienated. He feels as if he were a fish out of water. Billy does not find the meaning in life either in white America or in the upper class Indian society. Constant efforts to identify himself with the primitives are
reflected in his strange behaviour, his way of living, eating, dressing and thinking. Billy felt completely alienated in New York also. He doesn’t like to indulge in the drinking and money making which are the parts of the life style of the upper class people. Even in India he does not feel at home; a sense of hollowness haunting him frustrates and suffocates him. He tries his best to adjust himself socially and culturally but it is of no avail. Billy’s desire to belong to the primitive world coupled with the realization that he is unable to break the fetters of the modern world alienates him from every one. He finds himself helpless and confused, juxtaposed between the two extremes of culture; the resultant alienation leads him to choose anthropology instead of engineering. But it is a pity that Billy himself finds it difficult to comprehend the cause of his alienation. Billy, a thorough misfit in white America, returns to India and joins Delhi University as a professor in Anthropology. But he who is overwhelmed by hallucinations cannot be content with his new post. To overcome this situation he marries Meena Chattarjee who was “quite unusually pretty in a westernized sort of way” (TSCBB 28). But this hurried marriage, as he later realizes, is a blunder. The strained relation between Billy and Meena leads to his total sense of alienation and isolation from his wife, family and his own self. We can find that Billy’s
feeling of alienation grows to infinite proportions. He feels emptiness as much as he tries to attune himself to the civilized society.

Billy renounces the sophisticated Delhi Urban society in favour of primitive life in Maikala forest. Like prince Siddhartha, later Gauthama Buddha, though brought up in a royal family, Billy renounces his wife and child. After he settled down with Bilasia in the Maikala forest, Billy’s regenerative process takes place and he comes out in a new role. The tribals begin to consider Billy as their legendary King. Billy’s decision to join the tribal world is welcomed by the tribal community with mixed feelings of shock and jubilation. It is not civilization that Billy rejects, but the westernized upper class Indian society that is spiritually sterile and depraved. Thus Tapan Kumar Ghosh opines: “It is for him a movement from his feeling of alienation, from civilized society to a sense of communion with primitive life” (The Labyrinth of Life 77).

Naturally he left this world of the so called civilized men in search of a place where he was not treated as an outcast, not culturally uprooted, socially isolated and self estranged. Billy tells Romi the formula of his happiness in the tribal civilization: “What kept us happy, I suppose, were the same things that have kept all primitives happy through the ages: the earth, the forest, the rainbows, the liquor from the mahua, an occasional feast, a lot of dancing and love making and more than anything else no
ambition, none at all” (TSCBB 107). Arun Joshi presents Billy’s concern for civilization, society and himself through his letters written to Tuula Lindgren. He shows how alienated and estranged Billy feels in the civilization. Billy’s letters reveal his deep-rooted contempt for the money-centred civilization. He writes: “I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than making and spending of money. What else does the civilized man do” (TSCBB 69).

When Billy is on the brink of breaking himself (self-estrangement) he decides to join the other civilization which welcomes his entry. He cannot resist the calls of the elements of nature inviting him to come and join them. Billy, “a refugee from civilization” (TSCBB 102) gradually underwent his final metamorphosis. One night he is sexually aroused by the lascivious and tempting appearance of Bilasia who stood half naked before him. To quote Billy’s words: “I don’t believe I had ever felt towards any other woman what I felt towards Bilasia that night” (TSCBB 102). For the first time he had the sexual union with Bilasia. He gets so enamoured of the charm and bewitching appeal of Bilasia that he decides to bid good bye to the civilized world and takes to a primitive life with all its crudity and barbarity. In terms of psycho-analysis, the anima or the female principle in Billy and animus or the masculine counterpart in Bilasia discover ideal oneness in their sexual union.
Bilasia, for Billy, is a symbol of the primitive world as contrasted with the artefacts of the city which Meena represents. The novelist employs these two female characters to suggest the incongruity of the contrasting worlds: “The primitive Bilasia represents the Satpura Hills and through her the author aims at connecting culture and tradition with modernity” (Jeevan 27).

Billy comes to the tribal world not on an impulse, but after a long thought. He has come to his choice after realizing the futility of searching for his identity and meaning in life in the sophisticated materialistic civilization. The same society which failed to understand him has branded him as strange and abnormal. Hence he decides to bid farewell to that malicious unrelenting society to choose an entirely different and exciting civilization of the primitive. A major force that leads Billy to take this bold decision is his fascination towards Bilasia, the symbol of the wild untamed beautiful forest. She is different from all the other women who have appeared yet failed to make a mark in Billy’s life. Billy has misunderstood him, while Rima Kaul, his friend has driven him to the very verge of self-estrangement. But in Bilasia, Billy is able to find the other half of his self. The sexual union with Bilasia is a realization of Billy’s own self, his identity and meaning in life. It is a spiritual fulfilment, the purusha prakriti samyoga as described in the
Sankya Philosophy. The purusha and prakriti cannot help standing together and co-operating with each other:

Prakriti takes on form and structure in accordance with the needs of the Purusha. The whole cause of evolution is determined by a purpose and this purposive interpretation of nature makes Prakriti meaningless in divorce from Purusha in performing their own duties. (Hiriyanna 126)

Billy who merges with the tribal culture with a surprising ease, calm and softness is soon elevated to the position of the tribal man-god. Billy’s case is some way similar to the experience of Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce’s *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Billy felt regret over what he had done to his family. He would barely sleep at night. He quarrelled with everyone including Bilasia. He even thought of abandoning Bilasia and returning home. His sense of void and loss of will power are manifested in his own words: “The moment I sat down, my mind went blank. All my will power drained out of me. I felt as though I were in the presence of Fate. I knew I would never be able to leave these hills alive” (TSCBB 132). Mr. Biswas’s determination to trace out his son takes a new turn in the development of the story. Romi, who is also the district collector, orders a man-hunt for
Billy. The man-hunt which gathers momentum after the killing of a havildar by one of the tribals, takes the dimensions of the search for a much sought-after convict. The attempt of the police squad to catch Billy alive fails. Thus Billy had to sacrifice his own life as a heavy price for his escape from the civilized world. Though Romi’s intervention in the search is to alert Billy of the impending danger, the tribals mistake him to be their traitor.

In a way, Romi becomes responsible for Billy’s tragic death which becomes all the more tragic when we focus on what he said prior to his death. He opened his fast glazing eyes for a moment looking at Romi and said “You bastard” (TSCBB 167). It is an expression of indignation at the betrayal of friendship. Moreover, it is a bitter accusation of the thoughtless and meaningless assault of the civilized world on his birth right and freedom: “It is Billy’s final verdict on the civilization which to him is not natural, but bastardly” (Srinath, The Fiction of Arun Joshi 126). Joshi’s treatment of the theme of alienation in The Strange Case is an attempt to find viable alternative for “the most futile cry of man” (TSCBBB 7) to be understood in a smart society. This is the predicament of an alienated personality of the modern world filled with growing hostility, discontent, urbanization, changing values, psychological maladjustments etc., in which alienation has become a part of life. The
result is that estrangement from self and from society is almost a common experience. Hence *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is the psychograph of an alienated hero who is perhaps an unparalleled director in the whole gamut of Indo-English fictional character. Arun Joshi stresses alienation as a means to lead his characters to the community. The progression of the theme of alienation to the community is very significant in the first three novels of Arun Joshi.

Just like the first two novels of Arun Joshi, *The Apprentice* is also about alienation, sense of void and search for meaning in life. It depicts the anguished attempt of a guilt-stricken individual called Ratan Rathor to retrieve his innocence and honour. It portrays the effort of “a man without honour, a man without shame, perhaps a man of our times” (TA 141) to impose meaning and order on the life which lacks them. The novel contains a severe criticism of a rotten society with its meaningless pursuit of career, unscrupulous amassing of wealth in defiance of the sanctified values of its tradition like honesty, integrity of character, selfless service and honour. *The Apprentice* seems to be largely influenced by Albert Camus’s *The Fall* as the protagonists of the two novels use the confessional mode to express existential dilemma and social reality. The narrative consists of a long confessional monologue addressed to a college student from Punjab by Ratan Rathor, a
Government official who also hails from Punjab. A corrupt and unscrupulous life alienates Ratan from his friends. He probes into his inner life and exposes the treachery, pettiness and chicken-heartedness and the degeneration of his own character.

Unlike Sindi’s escapism or Billy’s rebellion, the novel is about the protagonist’s conformity to and victimization by a crooked and corrupt society thereby lending it a wider social relevance. *The Apprentice* employs the theme of alienation in a subtle way. In a way Ratan is every man and every individual. Though surrounded by people on all sides, Ratan feels that he is all alone. Ratan, a child of double inheritance, was brought up in an atmosphere of antithetical philosophies of life. On the one hand is the patriotic and ideal world of his father, and on the other is the worldly wisdom of his mother. The advice of his father keeps ringing in his ears: “To be good! Respected! To be of use!” (TA 18). Ratan’s mother, a tubercular patient with a pragmatic attitude towards life tells him to earn money: “Don’t fool yourself, son. Man without money was a man without worth. Many things were great in life, but the greatest of them all was money” (TA19). Ratan is torn between these two conflicting choices; one shown by his idealistic and patriotic father and the other by his materialistic mother. Unlike Sindi and Billy who make no compromise with the world, Ratan does so in *The Apprentice* and
becomes its victim. He dreams of achieving material success and in the process is alienated from his own self. He takes his whole life to realize the futility of everything. He experiences the pangs of civilization, which is full of lying, hypocrisy, bribery, graft and drunkenness and womanizing. Though Ratan does not feel at home in society, he doesn’t abandon it as Billy had done. After having been alienated from it for some time, he adapts himself to the world.

Ratan seeks to trace the root of the soul’s sickness and the reason behind his fall from innocence which gives the novel at once its form and meaning. Ratan presents before us the background of his childhood life both before and after the death of his father. He unfolds the story of his life, his hopes and aspirations, his dreams and fantasies, his agonies and anxieties. The account given is not a mere tale of the life of an individual but the story of a nation’s passage through a period of trials and tribulations. *The Apprentice* can be divided into three phases. H.M. Prasad remarks:

> The novel enacts three stages in the human divine comedy of Ratan. The pre-independence period is the dawn, the period of Idealism, the phase of innocence, the post-independence India is the broad daylight of experience, the
inferno of corruption, the last part of the expiation is the door to the purgatory. (Arun Joshi, 1985:65)

Ratan, who had to suffer a lot of hardships following the premature death of his father, is appointed a temporary clerk in the Dept.of War Purchases. His boss, noting his docility and implicit obedience, recommends him for confirmation. Ratan a careerist shamelessly pursues advancement in career and offers to marry the niece of the superintendent. Though all his colleagues call him a whore, he turns a deaf ear to their sarcastic comments and concentrates on going ahead with the pursuit of his ambitions. By now Ratan knows only too well that he would run on the basis of deals: “If men forgot how to make deals, the world would come to a stop[…] It is not the atom or the sun or god or sex that lies at the heart of the universe: it is DEALS. DEALS” (TA 48).

Just like Billy Biswas, Ratan becomes a prey to hallucinatory thoughts. Because of his strange way of behaviour and the influence of hallucination, his wife misunderstood that he was ignoring her. He seemed to be much more preoccupied than he really was. Meanwhile Ratan had now about a dozen clerks under him. Even when Ratan has a lot of money and other amenities, a sense of void and emptiness haunts
his mind: “And silence. Emptiness and silence are hard to bear. And yet, to make something of life, one has to know how to work through its emptiness and its silence” (TA 51). As he is a man suffering from the various problems of the self, Ratan undergoes a lot of oppressive moods. Besides feeling a sense of void, he feels restlessness followed by apathy and indifference. As a result of mental disturbance, Ratan began to be physically weak and even consulted a doctor.

To get promotion and confirmation of the post, Ratan becomes a liar, a sham, master-faker, but is estranged from humanity, especially when he accepts a big bribe. Ratan conforms to counterfeit values of civilization at the cost of his own individuality. Conformity is the height of alienation from oneself. With all hopes and faith, Ratan ventures to live a life but is soon disillusioned. To quote the words of Joy Abraham: “He feels like an explorer adventuring over an unfamiliar sea” (218). Ratan learns that being the son of a freedom fighter is of no use. He does rise through corrupt practices, making a compromise with his ideas, keeping up appearances and by discarding the world of ordinary decencies and friendship. Thereafter, Ratan strives for promotion and development in utter defiance of purity of means. He forgets all about his friends who are inferior to him in almost all aspects especially in education and intelligence. He is branded a “whore” (TA 47).
becomes a fake, a corrupt official and an exhausted family man. His inside seems to be hollow and moth-eaten. He loses his personality and even identity. In his perplexed state of mind, Ratan fails to comprehend the real meaning of life. Ratan’s accepting of bribe for clearing a huge pile of useless war materials lying in Bombay results in his friend Brigadier’s abandoning the post for which he is later court-martialled and in great depression the Brigadier commits suicide. This incident keeps haunting Ratan all his life like a dead albatross. A kind of prick of conscience continues to trouble Ratan’s mind. He also wondered how his wife and daughter would think of his accepting the bribe. He can’t even dream of a humiliation before his daughter. “What would she think if she came to know of my imprisonment? The bribe? We dread humiliation before any one, but, believe me, humiliation before one’s daughter is the worst. It is as though it were humiliation not before one person but in the eyes of an entire sex, an entire generation” (TA 106).

Ratan tried to justify his crime by highlighting the long list of corruptions and bribery. He thought whether he should share his dilemma with his friends and neighbours. The very idea of letting them know the truth was unbearable. He hasn’t shared anything with his wife in the twenty years of married life. Ratan recollects that after the birth of his daughter, boredom crept into his life. When he thinks of his past life,
he concludes that for twenty years, life has been full of darkness: “For twenty years I have lived in the city and for twenty years, it seemed to me, there had been nothing, but night, nothing but darkness” (TA 116). Ratan is disturbed and is left with the old depressing feeling that something had gone wrong with his life. He can’t understand why he readied to accept the bribe. He finds himself in a similar position with Camus’s Jean Baptiste Clemence who says: “Yet I was unhappy thus as if I had violated the code of behaviour” (The Fall 47).

The Brigadier’s suicide following India’s debacle in the Indo-China war literally stunned Ratan so much so that he was on a nervous breakdown. The vision of the Brigadier trailed him wherever he went. Ratan is filled with an endless torment of fear. He realizes the gravity of his sin. At last his alert consciousness alienates him from the degenerated society. Ratan realizes that his life had been a great waste: “A pile of dung. Twenty years and nothing gained. An empty lifetime. What had I learned? Pushing files? Manoeuvering? […]. Did I know the meaning of honour, friendship? Did I ever know it? Would I ever know it again?” (TA 133). Ratan thinks that Himmat Singh, an agent in the war material deal is responsible for all such untoward incidents. Ratan goes to him with the purpose of shooting him. But Himmat Singh’s touching words revealing his innocence, deprives Ratan of his urge for vengeance.
Consequently he plays the role of an apprentice by going to a temple and wiping the shoes of the congregation without entering the temple for prayer. It is gratifying to note that Ratan found a strict way to expiate his sin of bribery. He tells himself: “Be good. Be decent. Be of use” (TA 143). Unlike Billy and Sindi, Ratan sought the remedy for his soul’s malaise neither in flight from the treacherous society nor in detachment. He remained in the profligate society, of which he was a part and learnt to be of use to others. It is a positive thing to note that Joshi’s heroes become easily repentant of their wrongs and make up for them. Ratan starts anew with a firm faith in life and himself as he himself says: “I know it is late in the day. But one must try and not lose heart, not yield, at any cost, to despair” (143). This is reminiscent of the last line in Tennyson’s Ulysses: “to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield” (70).

The last part of the novel ends on a positive note. Thus Arun Joshi’s greatness resides in his having added a social dimension to The Apprentice through his moralistic vision of responsible existence.

Arun Joshi’s fourth novel The Last Labyrinth deals with both the inner and outer world of a westernized Indian aristocrat who has lost his spiritual roots. He remains an alienated figure till the end of his life. The narrative located mainly in Bombay and Benares, is an account of Som Bhaskar’s business deals and love story. In Som, the sense of alienation
is mixed with a sense of void. This sense of void makes Som “mentally shattered, morally degenerated and physically exhausted with the dreams and insomnia” (Reddy, 1985: 90). At twenty five, Som is a millionaire industrialist who inherits a gigantic plastic manufacturing industry. He has everything that is needed for worldly pleasures. He was highly educated in the most famous university. His wife Gita is well-bred and beautiful and remains loyal to her husband despite his love affair with the Leila Sabinis, a psychiatrist from Michigan and with Anuradha in Benares. Yet he suffers from an insatiable hunger of the body and the spirit. Som Bhaskar who experiences a sense of void and meaninglessness in life is a modern anti-hero embodying chaos and uncertainties. He suffers from indefinable hunger and restlessness. All his life, he has sung the strident song: “I want, I want, I want” (TLL 11). He goes on desperately living, clinging to one thing or person and trying to seek satisfaction in sex, wealth and fame. He feels a void, idleness and is lost in the labyrinth of thoughts.

Som is married with an ideal wife Geeta and two children, yet he fornicates. Som mistakes the restless wanderings of his mind as hunger for sex and consequently experiments with several sexual affairs. Leila Sabnis, a psychiatrist from Michigan, psychoanalyses Som’s character as follows: “You are much too high stung without reason. You are a
neurotic. A compulsive fornicator” (TLL 80). The case of Som Bhaskar, according to Dr. H.M. Prasad is that of “the crisis of consciousness” (The crisis of Consciousness – The last Labyrinth 238). In this novel the protagonist Som Bhaskar’s confrontation is not with the society, but with the forms and forces beyond the reckoning of reason and science. He finds the world meaningless and is convinced that life is full of complications: “a labyrinth within labyrinth” (TLL 29). Dr. K.K Srivastava suggests that “The title of Arun Joshi’s The Last Labyrinth can be operative on many levels” (85). At one level, it is physical in which Lal Haveli and Benares are both included. At the symbolic level, the Lal Haveli stands for the maze of life and the last labyrinth is death itself which is even more mysterious than existence itself.

Som, a product of the cosmopolitan city, finds himself alienated in the ancient society steeped in superstition. The novel concerns Som’s mad pursuit to possess Anuradha, 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 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 mistakes of life, death, love 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. (Arun Joshi’s Fiction: The Labyrinth of life. 131-32)

Som shuttles between Bombay and Benares with a determination to possess Anuradha. She was beyond his comprehension: “She was like the ocean, one could never reach the bottom of her” (TLL 132). Psychologically speaking, in Som the Freudian id dominates ego and superego. In the beginning, Anuradha is indifferent to Som’s offer of love, but in his next visit to Benares, he finds Anuradha by his bedside at night in the Lal Haveli and she acquiesces to him. Som also realizes that Anuradha is indispensable to him and keeps on visiting Lal Haveli for her sake and enjoys “the nourishment of the shades thrown by her naked body under the chromatic shower” (TLL 121-22).

Som rushes about in search of happiness and meaningfulness in life. His search for Anuradha makes him a psychic wreck. According to
Ramakrishna Rao “Anuradha is a Labyrinthine woman at once young and old, ancient and modern demoniac in her lust and divine in her love. She is every man’s woman and no man’s wife” (21). Som has been for a long time troubled by voids both internal and external. He experiences these voids continually. The feeling of emptiness does not leave him at peace with himself even for a minute. He goes to bed every night feeling empty and wakes up feeling empty the next morning. He just doesn’t know what to fill the emptiness with. He knows that there should be something that can fill this vacuum. He finds within himself: “Nothing but an empty roaring like the roar of the sea in a conch” (TLL 115). He fights insomnia all night and sleepwalks throughout the night. He has tried to drown himself in drink and soothe his nerves with tranquilizers; but as soon as their effects are over, the affliction would return with a relentless ferocity. He has carried on affairs with innumerable women, but each of these affairs has ended in bitterness and frustration. It has been hinted sporadically that there is a bit of Meursault (of The Outsider) and K (of Trial) in Som and therefore he finds his life absurd and can possibly have no solutions to his problem. All along his life, Som Bhaskar suffers from an inner crisis and as R.S. Pathak writes: “He is apparently at war with himself” (Human Predicament and Meaninglessness in Arun Joshi’s Novels 134). Som’s problems have to
be examined in the context of the changed social and psychological realities in modern India.

Lack of faith, however does not do Som any good. He is suffering from tension, unhappiness, disturbance, hysteria, neurosis and some strange dreams and insomnia while others around him are happy even in sufferings and in the face of death. Som’s suffering is on account of his fear of death. He admits: “I was insecure [...] I was afraid of death. That made a little more sense. I was mortally afraid of death” (TLL 74). Som feels diffident and discontented and knows that “if discontent is my trademark, trust is Geeta’s” (TLL 63). At last, the light of moksha dawns upon Som as if the whole universe had come out of a void. Som believes that the only way to solve his problems is by acquiring knowledge, and struggles hard to come to terms with life and find out its meaning with the help of knowledge. But this only adds to his discomfiture. A sense of void and the experience of feeling fragmented are quite natural phenomena for the present day generation. In spite of the incredible advancement made in the field of technology, we remain in a barbaric age, fighting confusion, void and problems of the self. Most of the characters in this novel especially Aftab, Anuradha and Som are desperate strugglers. Joshi makes a vain attempt in the novel to lead Som in the path of self-realization with the help of other characters.
Loneliness, alienation and anguish persist in Som all along driving him at times to the verge of insanity. It is in such a frustrated moment that he decides to put an end to his life and holds the revolver close to his temple, when his alarmed wife dissuades him from pulling the trigger. By resorting to this compulsive action, Som was showing his protest against his alienation at not being rightly understood by others. The novel ends revealing his longing to be understood at least by his wife, which would make him much less alienated in this angst-ridden world. Joshi is concerned with man’s feeling of anxiety arising from a sense of futility in life. Hence his obsession with anxiety and alienation arising out of the chaos prevalent in the modern age remains the central theme in all his writings. Compared to the protagonists of the earlier novels, Som Bhaskar in this novel seems to be the most complex and complicated character. Harimohan Prasad makes an apt comment: “He suffers from ruthlessness, a Hamlet like incertitude and inherent sickness” (The Crisis of Consciousness 235). Som is a typical Jungian man, full of inner harmony and is a loose cluster of fragment of identity, struggling to bring some authenticity to his life. The novel as a whole is a painstaking exploration of life, existence and reality through the dark labyrinths of Som’s turbulent mind. Unlike Sindi, Billy and Ratan, Som does not progress from alienation to existential affirmation. He continues to suffer
from indefinable hunger, restlessness and inherent sickness. The novel fails to resolve Som’s dilemma. Still we find some positive note in his attitude to life. He had always been vexed by the questions of life and death: His mystical craving remains unfulfilled and he continues to remain alienated. The phenomenon of alienation in a limited sense has a positive element to it as being healthy and desirable, but when it assumes great proportions, it turns morbid. It becomes an impediment to creative work, destroying good relationships and transforming trust into mistrust. In short, for all practical purposes, it is evident that the Western thinkers have no apparent solution to offer to the riddle of existential dilemma.

Arun Joshi’s protagonists are persons in search of a more authentic existence than that is available to them. Further, they lack involvement and surrender to external circumstances. Most of his protagonists try to achieve peace of mind by alienating them from others. Without affectionate and understanding parents, Sindi falls a victim to emotional deprivation. His childhood interaction has not provided him emotional security necessary for the development of a wholesome personality. Unhappy childhood incapacitates Sindi in establishing meaningful relationships in adult life. Lack of communication between the spouses is the bane of all matrimonial relationships. The impossibility of verbal communication between the spouses makes Billy
and Meena withdraw to a world of silence. Though they occasionally indulge in introspection, they lack the maturity and courage to achieve an honest appraisal of them. Disenchanted with life for different reasons, protagonists like Sindi and Billy become neurotic. For Ratan, all human relationships are deals. He embodies the very world of material values which his predecessors, Sindi and Billy reject. If they are rebels and dissidents, he is a victim. Yet in spite of the differences, they all are men engaged in the search for a meaning in life. They are lonely, ill at ease in the world in which they have to live. Som also makes several unsuccessful attempts to find out the cause of his sense of void and alienation. While Som Bhaskar fails to find a way out of the labyrinth of adversary experiences, others come out of the spiritual impasse after tormenting searches.