

# A Study on the Existentialist Elements in Arun Joshi's Novels

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**Abstract** – This paper focuses on the style and techniques adopted by the selected novelists to unravel the plot and bring out the identity crisis of the characters in the selected novels. Existentialism as a philosophical and cultural movement began in the mid-19th century. The existential elements of loneliness and isolation, the problem of finding meaning within existence are significantly present in his prominent works, *The Stranger* and *The Plague*. Existentialism has also been successfully explored in Indian English literature. The Indian English novelists have attempted to explore the individuality of man, his self-examination and search for his identity, his refusal to accept the traditional values propagated by religion or philosophy.

**Keywords-** Existentialist, Religious, Indian English Literature

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## INTRODUCTION

It can be said that modern man's life is full of tension & mental agony, and that his existence is in the midst of "a world that is shattering" (Kingston 3). The entire life of mankind as a whole is endangered by the catastrophic nuclear bombs created by scientists. As a result, there is an atmosphere of envy & unrest, uneasiness & boredom all over the world. Man has lost his human values, such as love, joy, pity and peace, and has become more like a computer machine. There is a gap between what the individual professes and what he actually does, between what he really is and what he should be. Such absurd situations give rise to psycho-social disorders and the loss of moral values. These negative attributes of human behavior have prompted a man to commit blunders. Sometimes deadly sins that eventually disrupt his inner health and happiness contribute to pain, anger, and dissatisfaction. He finds himself a misfit, therefore is alienated from nature, from society, and even from his own self. Such psycho-socio-cultural influences have weighed heavily on the minds and imaginations of authors and philosophers all over the globe. They examined the value & assumption of the society. Many existentialist theorists also denied civilization. Sartre considers society to be a hell. As per existentialism, society is oppressing the individual. It seeks to control him and undermine his freedom. Kierkegaard, the founder of modern existentialism, finds any rule created by government to be unrelated to the inner existence of the person. Victor E. Frankl, an existential psychologist, "equals the laws of society with those of the concentration camp"

Existentialism, in short, sees an individual as a victim of society & its laws, and advocates the right of an existing person to choose the course of his or her life. Jaspers considers the individual unique in his personal existence and completely irreplaceable. Martin Heidegger sees existence as belonging to the individual alone and to no one else. Sartre points out that the first effect of existentialism is that it "puts every man in possession of himself as he is and places all obligation for his existence on his shoulders" (Existentialism and Humanism 291). Existential thinkers have also focused their attention on human nature. Compared to them, human existence is not decided. Existentialism had its inception as a philosophic tendency or attitude manifested in Europe as a result of the two World Wars. Strictly speaking, it's not a well-knit school of thought. It's a congruence of views held by likeminded people. In any sense, both philosophical philosophers try to defend the right and value of human identity. In contrast to reason, they all emphasize the prominence of human will. We conclude that "every person is special & incomprehensible under every philosophical or science method" (Encyclopaedia Britannica 968). Existentialist views have mostly been disseminated through the novels, plays and essays. The Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was considered as the founder of existentialism.

## EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism as a philosophical & social development began in the mid-nineteenth century.

Prominent intellectual thinkers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus & Sartre correlated with the start of the philosophy of Existentialism have never admitted that they are responsible for development. Soren Kierkegaard is largely recognized as the first existentialist philosopher; however the development has become prominent due to the efforts of two French writers, Jean-Paul Sartre & Albert Camus.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), a French existential sociologist, influential novelist & playwright, is known as the father of existentialist philosophy. His trilogy, *Huis-clos* (No Exit), *Nausea*, *The Roads to Freedom* make an enormous contribution to the philosophy of existentialism. The main theme of existentialism is the opportunity of the individual. It points out that Man is inevitably responsible for his own actions. Sartre's notions of absurdity & alienation are linked to existential philosophy. In his exhibition *The Humanism of Existentialism 9*, Sartre sees that man is solely responsible for his actions, for there is no God to whom no concepts are predestined. Sartre's philosophy of existentialism is that man is not predestined to do his own thing, and is therefore completely responsible for his own destiny. Man should be true to himself, by experience alienation and loneliness. Feelings of anguish arise as man recognizes his freedom of will over the way the world sees him, the way normally he is expected to behave, the norms of behavior which determines society. This philosophy of Sartre has been critically discussed by prominent critics with reference to Sartre's writings in, *Being and Nothingness*. Albert Camus's name is synonymous with existentialism. The existential elements of loneliness and isolation, the problem of finding meaning within existence are significantly present in his prominent works, *The Stranger* and *The Plague*. *The Stranger* deals with the conflict of reason and experience, of good and evil, of innocence and guilt. Camus felt that meaning in life is to be found in the struggle to be true to oneself and in collaborating with society's collective efforts for peace and prosperity. Absurdity or irrationality of life and the inevitability of death constitute the unavoidable angst or agony of the human condition. The protagonist of *The Stranger*, Meursault guns down an Arab impulsively and is sentenced to death. The novel deals with his reflections on the absurdity of his situation as he resigns to his fate. He looks at life objectively and lives only in the present, is not concerned about the past merely because of the fact that past is gone so it is meaningless. Camus's existential treatise, *The Myth of Sisyphus* also deals extensively with the meaninglessness and futility of existence. He adopts the Greek legend of Sisyphus to convey his philosophy of absurdity. Consciousness of the meaninglessness of life can lead to resistance and search for one's true identity. Baker 10 observes that Albert Camus dealt with the theme of absurdity in his works because of which he is an existential writer. Soren Kierkegaard's criticism of theologians' wrongly converting religion – a highly subjective issue – into a

philosophic dogma can be said to be the starting point of the later existential creed of the sanctity of personal experience. Endorsement of the idea that individual experience is of paramount importance is found in the works of philosophers like Jaspers, Heidegger and Unamuno and novelists like Dostoevsky, Kafka, Sartre, Simon de Beauvoir, Andre Malraux and Camus. The problems of Existentialism as projected by Sartre in his works are essentially centered on concepts like the following:

- i. Existence precedes essence.
- ii. God is an idea invented by man to perpetrate the submission of gullible masses to the authority of state and church.
- iii. Man's lot is to live in this absurd world with the knowledge that he cannot hope for any surcease or aid outside himself.
- iv. A glorious future for man is still possible because backed by the rational outlook and atheism people can really work for the establishment of an egalitarian society.

In summation it can be concluded that, existentialists believe that man is what he makes of himself, he is not predestined by God or by society. If he refuses to choose or lets outside forces determine him, he is contemptible. For this reason existentialism insists on only actions of will which are the ultimate determining factors of life. Thus the individual has no recourse to any other determining factors including religion, he has to create his own meaning for his or her own self as there are no meanings or structure that come before one's own existence. In this perspective existential thought has attained the unfair reputation of pessimism. In general the very idea of creating meaning in life appears to be absurd and meaningless. Even the tenets associated with existentialism such as loneliness, alienation, fear, angst, etc. Which is appears at the outset as pessimism. Nevertheless, existential philosophy does not advocate a negative approach to life or reality, the philosophy in fact is all about understanding oneself and revolves around the boundless capabilities of an intellectual and ethically conscious individual to bring about positive change in his life and subsequently in the world. So positive change is crucial for the true existentialist; in order to lead a fulfilling life. Otherwise life becomes meaningless and purposeless and a complete void to them. Taking into consideration this view point existentialism is not at all about pessimism but about bringing a positive meaningful change in one's life.

Existentialism has also been successfully explored in Indian English literature. The Indian English novelists have attempted to explore the individuality of man, his self examination and

search for his identity, his refusal to accept the traditional values propagated by religion or philosophy. His determination to pursue his own will though it may appear illogical or unreasonable and his meaninglessness of life leading to absurd theories are the tenets of existentialism. These philosophies and thoughts are prominently seen in the writings of existential writers. Chaturvedi states that,

Another most significant feature of the Post Independence novels produced during the period between 1950s and 1980s was a shift of emphasis from the external to the internal, the socio-political issues to the individual problems.

According to general critical consensus 'Modernity' in the novel consists in a daring exploration of hitherto forbidden themes, an amoral analysis of human behavior, a deliberate debunking of repressive morality, a sympathetic portrayal of the subliminal drives directing human emotion and action and an unwillingness to conform to accepted ideas of heroism and respectability. Modern novels also boldly present an unvarnished account of life in the raw. Profundity and purposefulness seems to have no place in recent novels in which life is portrayed as an absurd and enigmatic riddle. The reason for this is not far to seek. Prompted by the rationalistic outlook of the scientific age to see in religion not a reservoir of strength but a debilitating dependence, modern man is impelled to give up his implicit faith in religion. Disillusioned by man's inhumanity to man in times of war and peace, finding no substitute for religion in any 'ism' or ideology, crushed by the frantic pace of modern life, hemmed in from all sides by strife and stress the people in modern age justifiably feel that they are drifters in life with no moorings and this pervasive desolation has found poignant expression in most post modern novels. The objective of most recent novelists seems to be to analyze the causes for this soul-sickness and to explore ways and means by which the two more virulent spiritual maladies – loneliness and alienation can be held at bay. In the course of this pre-occupation the perspective of the novel has understandably shifted from sociological evaluation to psychological analysis. The shift of focus of Indian English novel to existential angst can be apparently noticed in the writings of Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Arun Joshi. These novelists concentrated on the existential suffering and agony of man in their writings. The tradition initiated by Anita Desai was continued by Arun Joshi, Nayantara Sehgal, Salman Rushdie and their contemporaries.

Kamala Markandaya in her novel *The Nowhere Man* superbly portrays the diverse critical strands of man's agony in the face of impending old age and inevitable death, the plight of immigrants in an alien country and racial discrimination. Srinivas of *The Nowhere Man*, is the 'nowhere man' who, after passing two-thirds of his life in England is considered

an outsider. He is pestered by the local racists to leave the country. He is confused and disoriented as to where he belonged, an Indian who lived in England for so long that he lost his ethnic identity and finally becomes a rootless person with nowhere to go. Srinivas appears to be the spokesperson of several Indian immigrants who lost their own ethnic roots and remain rootless and miserable in an alien country. An examination of the novels of Kamala Markandaya reveals that she is intently concerned with presenting the plight of her female protagonists who are constantly in search for their identity. Their internal and external struggle, the process of asserting their identity is well evident in her female protagonists. Their strong urge to locate their acceptable place and identity in society in spite of immense struggle is their primary concern. Interestingly all her women characters reveal a positive and optimistic attitude towards life in spite of being suppressed and dominated by various factors. They are portrayed as stronger than their male counterparts and they have their unique ways and means of leading a meaningful life. By exercising their own free will, exhibiting their own self, they get fulfillment and recognition in life. Kamala Markandaya successfully and subtly explores the themes of existentialism.

Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai & Jhumpa Lahiri are probably the best exemplars of existentialism in English Indian fiction. Those who do not bother to give elaborate specifics of social settings, as individuals study, man more, as a victim of his own inner environment than of the external material or moral climate. Their characters are more worried with their own extremely sensitized world of sense & sensitivity than with the average Indian's biggest problem of keeping body & soul together. Every one of these novelists is extremely objective in so far that it portrays both the pain and the joy of an ultimately emotional reaction to the moving panorama of life. With all their erratic behavior & stylistic flair, the protagonists in the novels of these writers are sincere & courageous, forsaking the easier path of conformity to an external code & opting to make their own feelings the guiding principle of their own destiny. The lack of access to a moral reference point outside their inner nature is at once a proof of the strength of these protagonists & immensity of their burden of loneliness in needing to win their own scheme of values. The shift of the focus of Indian English novel to existential anguish has become clearer, particularly with Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai & Arun Joshi, who have explored the agonized existence of modern man in their writings. Kamala Markandaya, a pioneer member of the Indian Diaspora concentrates on Cross-cultural and interracial conflicts in her novels. Her novels deal with different predicaments of identity crisis. The theme of loneliness and alienation are very strongly dealt with in almost all her novels. She presents restless characters,

characters who want to be freed from inner anxiety. They are lonely, emotionally insecure; her characters tend to be oversensitive to violence and death. However, alienation and existentialism are strongly projected in *Possession* and *The NowhereMan*. Imbibing new concepts & principles & acquiring new creative perspectives from the contributions of earlier authors is an important part of the blooming of the artistic spirit, and this is better demonstrated by Arun Joshi's example. This is more in the natural environment of exploring 'fresh forests & new pastures' than in servile imitation that's writer such as Arun Joshi freely draw from continental writers like Kafka & Camus. It should not be mistaken for a repudiation of his Indianans as to be traditional does not mean to be insular. The criticism that there is too much artificiality in modern Indo-English novels as they deal with problems which are pertinent to Western ways of life does hold good as far as Arun Joshi is concerned. His choice of themes; The development of the human spirit in the environment of democracy, the suffering of the wretched soul trapped in the violent universe, and so on., is a typification of common reality rather than of regional or cultural idiosyncrasies. As it is a philosophic concept of life that has sometimes been successfully explored in literature and not a literary school of thought, existentialism has no particular style or form associated with it.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Existential philosophy has influenced Indian English literature immensely. The changing paradigms in Indian English literature reflect the sociological, political and psychological changes in our society. A review of literature highlights the different perspectives of existentialism and the varied techniques adopted by writers to portray the thematic content and the sensitivity of the protagonists. Moreover, it enables the researcher to attain a clearer perspective and greater insight about the issues and concerns of the existential writers especially the Indian English novelists; Anita Desai, Arun Joshi & Jhumpa Lahiri, whose fictional works are a major part of the research. A large volume of critical works have been in a number of research journals and several volumes have also been published on existentialism and existential writers.

**Jonathan (2008)** examines the existential philosophy of Jean – Paul Sartre with reference to the various interpretations of his theory by philosophers. He attempts to bring out a coherent study of the themes of Sartrean existentialism with reference to his book, *Being & Nothingness*. After the publication of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre's philosophy of Existentialism was misunderstood and twisted as something which is depressing and cynical. However, it is the other way round it helps us to understand our true nature and teaches us to accept ourselves as we really are. Sartre theory of freedom and responsibility, his interpretation of 'bad

faith', his views of character as determination of fate, patterns of behavior traits, etc. are examined by Jonathan in detail with specie reference to Sartre's book, *Being & Nothingness* to present an understanding of Sartrean Existential philosophy.

**Ronald (2005)** compares and contrasts the philosophical views of Camus and Sartre, the two intellectuals, famous playwrights, novelists, philosophers, journalists and editors. He discusses Camus's absurdity theory with reference to *Nausea & Being and Nothingness*, which explores the meaningless of existence. Camus and Sartre worked parallel to each other. Camus was the editor of the Paris daily, *Combat* and Sartre was the writer of a French political and cultural journal, *Les Temps modernes*. Camus appreciated Sartre's theory of absurdity and admired his works but both the philosophers differed in many issues.

**Walter Kaufmann (1975)** expounds the existential philosophy with reference to the works of novelists and philosophers of existentialism. He analyses the writings of Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Rilke, Kafka, Ortega, Jasper, Heidegger, Sartre and Camus. Existentialism is regarded to be the outcome of different revolts against the traditional philosophy it does not belong to any particular school of thought.

**Kaufmann** discusses Dostoevsky *Notes from Underground*, which is considered to include the best existential thoughts. The major themes of existentialism from Kierkegaard to Camus are stated in it. A comparison is drawn between the philosophical thoughts of the first existential philosopher Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky is presented to ascertain the argument of Dostoevsky as an existentialist. Kierkegaard was known as an existentialist after First World War and Nietzsche was also considered an existentialist with his marked dissatisfaction with the traditional philosophies. Another existentialist Jaspers was opposed to the title of existentialism but, it is in the works of Jaspers that the seeds sown by Kierkegaard & Nietzsche grew into existentialism.

Heidegger like Jaspers was against the title of existentialism he considered it as an inappropriate title and gives detailed explanation of it in, *On Humanism*. Existentialism came into prominence to an international audience with works of Jean Paul Sartre. Sartre's image of human situation like that Shakespeare, at times whatever decisions we make we cannot escape guilt. His *The Wall*, *Childhood of a Leader* gives agonized awareness of the existential issues. *The Wall* presents very valid arguments and gives an insight to the 'central existentialist motif of confrontation with death'

**Jacob Golomb (1995)** examines the literature and literary works of existential philosophers from Kierkegaard to Camus and analyses their

principles of portraying authenticity. Jacob's enthusiastic quest of authenticity and existentialism reinforces the relevance of existentialism in the present day context. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus and other were in constant search for authentic heroes and characters, unable to find them they resorted to biblical and historical examples. Jacob draws a comparative study of authenticity, sincerity and honesty with reference to Sartre's Being and Nothingness and other existential writers. He concludes that the existential writers perhaps agreed on the principle that, any positive definition of authenticity would be self-nullifying. Thus authenticity and sincerity are opposed to one another, they cannot be equivalent. The main aim of the writers of authenticity was to evoke in their readers the pathos of authenticity.

**Gavin** (2004) brings out the impact of globalization on the philosophy of existentialism. Globalization is responsible for the drastic inevitable changes on the sociological, psychological and scientific perspectives. The impact of globalization on existentialism is significant as it brought out pragmatic changes and challenges in the daily life of man. Existentialism is the realization of the true authentic identity of Man this sensitive issue has become more complex with the positive and negative effects of globalization. The challenges of culture, increasing dislocation, deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural identities, fear of the unknown, fluidity of cultural changes have greatly impacted the existential thoughts.

Sanderson states that the existential experiences of man can be analyzed from the psychological point of view rather than superficial experiences of an individual.

**Cagri** (2012) elucidates the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre by discussing his two plays, *The Flies* and *No Exit*. He elaborates Sartre's existential thoughts; seeking authenticity in a meaningless and absurd world and man is what he makes of himself, he is free and responsible for his actions. Sartre's Being and Nothingness is about human freedom, feeling of anguish and anxiety when man denies taking responsibility for him, it is 'bad faith'. The two manners of being are 'being- for- itself' which is subjective and 'being- in- itself' which is objective are discussed and the themes of existentialism are listed in conclusion; absurdity of life, alienation, anxiety, forlornness, responsibility, individuality, authenticity, passion/engagement and death.

**Arvind** (2010) discusses the stream of consciousness style used by Arun Joshi to portray the psychological anguish of his protagonists. Like Anita Desai, Arun Joshi is concerned with depiction of the psychological reality, the inner world of his protagonists in its various levels. Arvind states that Sindi's realization of his alienation, his tormented condition, his rootlessness and sense of foreignness

is presented effectively with use of stream of consciousness technique. Arvind compares Sindi to the protagonist of T.S. Eliot's *Hollow Man*; both the protagonists suffer from a sense of alienation which comes from their inner consciousness. Joshi uses soliloquies, internal monologues and flashbacks to present the psychological struggle of Billy in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, of Ratan in *The Apprentice* and of SomBhaskar in *The Last Labyrinth*.

**Shanmuga** (2011) examines Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* not only from the psychological point of view but also from ecological point of view. Her perspective unlike Navaneethamani focuses on the shift from human - centered to nature - centered perspective of Joshi. Joshi's personal trait is revealed through his nature-loving, primitive savvy protagonist Biswas. Joshi through the characterization Billy Biswas presents several eco-socialist views, ethno-scientific and ethno-medical information.

**Debarati's** (2009) article attempts to map the journeys Indians undertake abroad, across continents and cultures, their existential crisis in a multi-ethnic and multicultural society. She examines the characters of *The Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*. The Indian immigrants are attracted to their roots in a nostalgic manner and distinguished the experiences of the first and second generation of immigrants. The reactions of Ashima and Ashoke to her adopted culture are different from their children Gogol and Sonali. Shoba, Mrs. Sen and the other characters of *The Interpreter of Maladies* experience anguish and identity crisis in their adopted country. JhumpaLahiri herself experienced the space between two continents and cultures thereby she could present in detail the perspectives of multi cultural experiences.

**Sharma** (2013) discusses the theme of familial relationships of Anita Desai's novel *Cry the Peacock*. Anita Desai novels are always critiqued as existential novels, as the theme of loneliness alienation and meaninglessness of life are extensively dealt with. Sharma examines the familial relationship of the protagonist Maya, her inability to maintain a meaningful relationship with her husband, Gautama. Both Maya and Gautama had entirely different upbringings so the disparity in their characteristics and opinions lead to conflict and ultimate disaster. She compares and contrasts two very different characters.

## CONCLUSION

In summation it can be concluded that, existentialists believe that man is what he makes of himself, he is not predestined by God or by society. If he refuses to choose or lets outside forces determine him, he is contemptible. For this reason

existentialism insists on only actions of will which are the ultimate determining factors of life. Thus the individual has no recourse to any other determining factors including religion, he has to create his own meaning for his or her own self as there are no meanings or structure that come before one's own existence. In this perspective existential thought has attained the unfair reputation of for pessimism. In general the very idea of creating meaning in life appears to be absurd and meaningless. Even the tenets associated with existentialism such as loneliness, alienation, fear, angst, etc. Which is appears at the outset as pessimism.

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