

**The Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi's  
*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas and The Apprentice***

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**Abstract:**

This study attempts to explore the existential dilemma of modern man through Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and *The Apprentice*. One of the most captivating existential books in Indian English literature is *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* by Arun Joshi. In this book, a young Indian man with a Western education who rejects metropolitan consumerism in pursuit of a genuine life experiences a spiritual crisis. Through Billy Biswas' journey from elite society to tribal community, Joshi explores existential themes such as alienation, identity crisis, freedom, responsibility and the search for meaning. His novel *The Apprentice*, precisely deals with the modern man's emotional, psychological and social problem and is confronted with the problem of self and the question of its existence. The novelist faithfully records contemporary man's trials, tribulations, tortures and traumas. The protagonist suffers from the strange ailment from the society in which he dwells. He feels as if he is an outsider. This paper examines the existential dimensions of the two novels in the light of modern existential philosophy, particularly the ideas associated with thinkers like Jean -Paul Satre and Albert Camus, while also situating Billy's and Ratan's crisis within the Indian socio-cultural context.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, alienation, identity crisis, authenticity, modernity, materialism, victimization, trauma

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## **Introduction**

One of the best Indo- Anglian authors on human plight is Arun Joshi. The modern man is in a terrible mess notwithstanding the advances in science and technology, which have expanded the sources of his comfort and enjoyment. He has nothing to rely on in times of need, either inside or outside of himself, and is cut off from both his innermost self and his fellow humans. Joshi's works effectively convey the disillusionment of today's metropolitan civilization, which leads to the withering of lives, hopes, and joys. The conflict between tradition and modernity frequently gave rise to existential distress in the Indian context.

### **Alienation and Search for Authentic Identity in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas***

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* by Arun Joshi dramatizes this issue in striking detail. Despite his material prosperity, Billy, who was raised in an affluent Indian family and received his education in America, feels a profound spiritual emptiness. His retreat into a tribal environment and rejection of civilized civilization serve as a metaphor for his search for a genuine life. Billy Biswas, the main character, is from "the upper crust of Indian society" (p.9). Billy is the son of a European ambassador and a high court judge in India. After receiving his education in America, he joins Delhi University as a lecturer. Billy leaves the city and settles among the hill tribes of Central India because he longs for a more basic way of life. Billy's awareness of the deeper layers of his personality makes him something like an existential being, alienated from the superficial reality of life.

Billy is somewhat of an existential entity, cut off from the surface reality of existence by his awareness of the deeper facets of his psyche. He suddenly becomes curious about who he is. "Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?" (p.122). The novel explores the hero's dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun (p.8).

Billy's identity issue is exacerbated rather than resolved by the structured, systematized, civilized life that modern man takes pride in. Billy is therefore filled with an appetency for the primeval world and a profound dislike for the civilized world. Billy's strong primal tendencies and dislike of civilization are evident when he is in America, where he is purportedly studying engineering but is actually getting ready for a doctorate in anthropology. Even so he is less interested in books on his

subject than in the places they describe and learning about “the aboriginals of the world” (p.14).

Billy begins his musical sessions by playing on a pair of bongo drums and talks about his first view of the other side. Billy does not feel at home in America or the refined lifestyle it stands for. He believes that white America is too civilized. He decides to be in Harlem, one of the worst slums in New York, for this reason. His desire for India is therefore a desire for deeper things that the primordial Indian aboriginal societies stand for. Even on his return to India, he feels ill at ease in the upper-class sophisticated society and feels like “a visitor from the wilderness to the marts of the Big City” (p.69).

Billy's grasp on life and experiences is eroding. He is really tired of the superficiality of post-independence upper-class Indian society. He is driven out of this society by his wife Meena, who is the daughter of a civil official and received her education in the best missionary convents. Billy tells his companion Romi that if Meena had had a remarkable level of empathy or even a decent understanding of human misery, he may have made his last escape.

However, Meena's ambition, upbringing, and twenty years of exposure to a phoney society have prevented her from comprehending the factors that are undermining her spouse. Her ignorance pushes Billy to the brink of hopelessness, which leads to Rima Kaul's seduction. Billy is appalled by the seduction.

Billy's options have now become plain: “I had two clear choices: I could either follow this call, this vision, whatever the cost, or be condemned to total decay (p.190). He flees the vile, pointless life in the so-called civilized society as soon as he experiences the horrible shock of his degradation. Despite having existed since childhood and being relegated to the background thus far, the desire to live like a man in the primal world becomes overwhelming.

He retreats into the vast mountainous regions of Central India, where the hill tribes live in primal simplicity, out of a withering indifference to his own world and his own family. Billy sees it as a shift from the dark to the light. The promise of a fundamental power that can sustain him is great in the dark forests.

Billy quickly becomes into one of the primitives, speaking their language, eating their cuisine, and dressing in nothing more than a loin cloth. The tribal people quickly begin to worship him as their king and God as he lives out their beliefs and superstitions and experiences their joys and tragedies. He becomes, as he himself thinks, "some sort of a priest" (p. 191). He finds his fulfilment in the love of Bilasia "the essence of that primitive force that had called me night after night, year after year" (p. 142). When he reaches a turning point in his life, he chooses the route that will save him, first in love and later in death. He won't be allowed to be in the civilized world that his parents, wife, and government guardian represent. They attempt to bring him back to society. He is shot dead during the ensuing scuffle, ending his tranquil life. Billy's dying words "you bastards" (p. 233), which are apparently a direct abuse, an expression of anger at the betrayal of friendship, are right verdict on civilization which is not natural but bastardly. Thus, the issue of man's restlessness in modern life and his fruitless attempts to escape it is well illustrated in the work. It focuses on the crisis of modern civilization in the modern world of industry and commerce in general, and upper-class Indian culture in particular.

#### **Moral Anxiety and Quest for Redemption in *The Apprentice***

The tension between societal and personal validation is causing *The Apprentice* to feel resentful. Chaos, disarray, absurdity, violence, brutality, and insensitivity are the hallmarks of modern life. In addition to encouraging the dishonest pursuit of wealth and power, the ambiguous political and administrative structure has distorted generally acknowledged ethical standards. The person with heightened awareness feels helpless and cut off from both his environment and his own self. Joshi critiques the dehumanizing materialism of the current century in this book. The protagonist is Ratan Rathor who is the son of a freedom fighter. The humiliating experiences of job-seeking, of being "examined, interviewed, interrogated, and rejected" (p. 30), before he gets a clerical job in a government office adds a new dimension to his life. He becomes "at the age of twenty-one, a hypocrite and a liar; in short a sham" (p. 28). Till then he is very much the son of his father, a selfless idealist who holds his ideal above everything. A man with an agonised sense of life he feels shocked at the atrocity committed by the British people: month after month young men were sucked into the turbulence — to be imprisoned or shot down, or disappear underground. Every now and then someone I knew was imprisoned maimed or killed and for days afterwards I felt burdened as though in some way I had been responsible for the killing. (p. 21)

He upholds his moral integrity even in the early stages of his work. He is a responsible, self-respecting, and ashamed man who puts in a lot of effort at work. Even if his diligence and obedience allow him to go up the bureaucratic ladder, he is constantly frustrated by the unfair and inconsistent reality. After turning down a contractor's son's massive bribe of ten thousand rupees, he feels depressed: If earlier, during the days of the inn, my back had nearly been broken by the world's unjust thrashing, I was now struck dumb by its other face, the absurd servility, with which it was willing to turn about and worship the very men whom it had earlier thought nothing of annihilating (p.44). The hopeless mess of life inspires nausea in Ratan Rathor who thinks of bringing about a change in the existing set-up and writes an article entitled "crisis of character" (p. 57).

However, it quickly becomes apparent that he disregards traditional norms in order to further his career and becomes entangled in a web of political and administrative corruption. He encounters drinking, womanizing, bribery and graft, hypocrisy, and worse. His obsession with work, his fear of losing his career, and his desire for a promotion destroy his spirit and rob him of his identity and personality. He becomes moth-eaten and hollow inside. The pursuit of a successful career, as he comes to believe, is not to be realized through hard work but through "flattery and cunning" (p. 69).

He degenerates to the point of accepting bribes and passing faulty military supplies, which kills his own friend the Brigadier. Corruption of all forms and at all levels hardens the narrator, who is no longer able to be startled. He is deeply shaken by the realization of the truth about his corrupt deed, for which he was detained, and his subsequent release due to the intervention of the Minister and the Secretary, who were the agents responsible for the act. He is unable to discern between right and wrong because life is so complicated and confusing: "What had I done, what had I done which I should not have done? What was right? What was wrong? What was the measure for doing things or not doing them?" (p. 72-73)

With a troubled conscience he goes to Himmat Singh, the person who bribed him at the instance of the higher authorities, to avenge his friend's death and soon realises the absurdity of the whole thing and reflects: "That is a terrible sensation, my friend — may God preserve you from it — the realisation that one's life has been a

total waste, a great mistake; without purpose, without results... All else, thoughts of revenge, of pain, pale before it, are made pointless." (p. 140).

He is worn out and chastised within by the sense of futility. In order to atone for his transgressions of dishonesty, cowardice, and indirect murder, Ratan Rathor, out of grief, humiliation, and a sense of guilt, completes the most challenging apprenticeship in the world: wiping the congregation's shoes while seated on steps outside the temple every morning on his way to work. Thus, Joshi's *The Apprentice* is concerned with the plight of the contemporary man who is "sailing about in a confused society without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose" (p.74).

### **Conclusion**

This succinct analysis demonstrates the existential note found in Arun Joshi's works, which represent daring attempts to understand the nature of self-realization and identify proactive strategies for resolving the gap between human fulfillment and ambitions. His books eloquently convey Arun Joshi's belief that by releasing the self from the damaging normative demands of the money-worshipping social context and committing to the satisfaction of its true inner needs, man can demonstrate his human greatness and exercise his capacity for choice and freedom. They place a strong focus on the necessity of easing the anxiety-inducing strains brought on by man's horrifying decline and regaining his ability to experience love, fulfillment, and affirmation. Therefore, the issue of man's restlessness in modern life and his hopeless attempt to escape it is wonderfully illustrated in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and *The Apprentice*. The philosophy of existentialism is subjective. Like existentialists and philosophers, Joshi is conscious of human emotions and alienation. His heroes' identity issues and estrangement stem from their quest for purpose in life. Joshi's existential view of modern man revolves around the knowledge of aimlessness.

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