

# Existentialism... In Context to the Novels by Arun Joshi

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.120700102>

Received: 08 July 2025; Accepted: 16 July 2025; Published: 05 August 2025

## ABSTRACT

The term *existentialism* was coined by the French Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel in the mid-1940s. Existentialism is a form of philosophical inquiry that explores the problem of human existence and centers on the subjective experience of thinking, feeling, and acting. For example, in the view of an existentialist, the individual's starting point has been called "the existential angst", a sense of dread, disorientation, confusion, or anxiety in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world. Existentialist thinkers frequently explore issues related to the meaning, purpose, and value of human existence. Existentialism is associated with several 19th- and 20th-century European philosophers who shared an emphasis on the human subject, despite often profound differences in thought. Arun Joshi is one of the important novelists, who explores the existential crisis at different levels as personal, social, economic and political. It is an attempt to analyse existentialism in his novels.

**Keywords** - Existentialism, existential angst, disorientation, sense of dread.

## INTRODUCTION

The word Existentialism bears its significance in the first part of the twentieth century and was considered a new philosophy that emerged from the thought process of an afflicted man. The writers of the times have brought prominence through their writings and a new theory of philosophy, Existentialism, emerged as a result. —Existentialism, strictly speaking, is not a systematic school of philosophy in a clear-cut way but a fountainhead of several revolts in the past against traditional philosophy. However, the theory attracted a lot of criticism and opposition owing to its complexity. Nevertheless, the theory did not get a proper definition owing to its complexity and vastness initially. The theory later underwent a metamorphosis and gained its stand over the years and is applauded by the writers and the readers. As such Existentialism owns no proper definition. Jean Wahl refers to it as "Philosophies of existence." While Morton White sees a controversial element in the term. Jean Paul Sartre opines that "What then is this that we called Existentialism? Most of them who are making use of this word would be highly confused if required to explain its meaning' Besides, he feels that the word is now so loosely applied to so many things that it no longer means anything at all. The word in itself appears to be intense feelings beyond comprehension. In the book titled, Existentialism, Mary Warnock writes that Existentialism is a compound of emotional and intellectual factors to an equal degree. The word, Existentialism is derived from the root word, Existence, and coined its adjective form as existential and adding '\_ism' to evolve the theory of Existentialism. The word has its counterparts in different languages; '\_existence' in French, '\_existenz' in German language, '\_existensia' in Latin while '\_asti' in Sanskrit. All the words have the root meaning as existence or the state of existence. Humans by their very nature are unhappy and hence seem to exist all time rather than living happily. The same nature of man has become a plot for many writers to explore as a theme in their novels. Man always wants to be free with many choices yet the same makes him unhappy as he seldom gets his choices fulfilled completely.

Existentialism is one of the philosophies that have been prevalent in the twentieth century. It emphasizes an individual's existence, freedom and choice. It is a point of view that humans define themselves as making rational decisions despite their existence in an irrational world. The word at large focuses on human existence and strongly believes in the concept that there is no purpose of life in one's existence. The philosophy believes that

there is no God or any transcendent force to create or find a purpose for one's life. Rather one has to face life on his own clinging to one's very existence. Hence by the very word it defies of any definition. Many philosophers have failed to arrive at a consensus on its definition. Soren Kierkegaard is considered to have been the first philosopher who tried to put the thought of existentialism though not with the same name but with a different perspective. He proposed that every individual must try his best to add more meaning to life by his thoughts actions and by being a passionate, sincere and authentic person in life. The word existentialism is used in a way to describe the state of being or existing. But the philosophers believe that the word 'Existential is an act not merely existing. Existence, therefore, represents to act, in reality —In fact, Etymology: The work "Existentialism" was first coined by the French Catholic philosopher, Gabriel Marcel but was rejected by the philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre proposed that —Existence precedes essence. He was of the opinion that the very existence comes before to the essence of one. It is how we add value or essence to our existence. Just as the very nature of things is disorder, human consciousness by very nature is unhappy. According to Heidegger, Existentialist philosophy propagates no dualism regarding mind and body, no distinguishing between subject and object. His philosophy rejects the language of consciousness, experience and mind. Thus his analysis lingers around the concept of self-questioning as we are ontological and search for own-ness. The search for authenticity takes us to ever-renewed questions like; nature of the self, meaning of life and a morbid concept of 'being-unto-death.' Gabriel Marcel (1889—1973), was one of the first existentialist philosophers who believed that theistic existentialism always opposed Sartre's perception of existentialism of isolated self, the death of god and that of living experience. Marcel being a literary critic, playwright and a concert pianist lived a life of an intellectual. Many existentialists believed that life is but to live and to bear with all the consequences and any relation with others goes in vain. The philosophical approach known as existentialism is commonly recognized for its view that life's experiences and interactions are meaningless. Many existentialist thinkers are led to conclude that life is only something to be tolerated and that close or intimate relationships with others should be avoided. Gabriel Marcel's original philosophical voice was heard distinctly among this exposition of despair and dread. Marcel, a World War I non-combatant veteran, pursued the life of an intellectual and enjoyed success as a playwright, literary critic, and concert pianist. He was trained in philosophy by Henri Bergson. A prolific life-long writer, his early works reflected his interest in idealism.

Marcel in his philosophy propagated that his work was marked by an emphasis on the concrete and on the lived experiences. After converting to Catholicism in 1929, he opposed atheistic existentialism, and mostly that of Jean-Paul Sartre. However, Marcel was greatly dismayed at the Sartre's description of the isolated self, the death of God and experience of life with "no exit." Regardless of his point of departure, Marcel throughout his life drew back at the designation of his philosophy as, "Theistic Existentialism." He argued that, though theism was consistent with his existentialism, it was not a necessary attribute of it. Rene Descartes in contrast propagated that consciousness in a man dominates humans while existentialists think that the human is transferred into a hardened world where existence comes first to consciousness. As Sartre puts it: —At first[Man] is nothing. Only afterwards will he be something and he himself will have made what he will be". Existence is thus prior to essence in contrast with the conventional philosophy which Sartre later admitted. Unlike René Descartes, who believed in the dominance of consciousness, Existentialists assert that a human being is "thrown into" a concrete, inveterate universe that cannot be "thought away" and therefore existence in this world precedes consciousness and is the ultimate reality.

## DISCUSSION

Fiction for Arun Joshi is not a medium for propagating ideas or ideological debts that gained currency in post-modern times. He neither advocates political or social ideas like Mulk Raj Anand nor does he create an imaginary world like R. K. Narayan. In his novels man is invariably confronted with the self and the questions of his existence. He prefers serious probe into the existential problems of mankind. His indictment of the materialistic drive of the spiritual sterile society appear to be deeply rooted, not in any religio-philosophical attitude, but in the simple fact of man's deviation from his own elemental self.

Arun Joshi, a prolific Indian writer came into limelight through his novels *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and *Apprentice*, in particular. His novel, *The Last Labyrinth* was also much appreciated by his readers and critics alike. His out of the world and beautiful representation of Urban Characters, who educated and belonged to urban

class, yet shown to be disturbed and unstable. He showed his protagonists living a life that remained unsure of its existence, but remained involved in every aspect of the same through some form or the other.

Arun Joshi is known to be an author par excellence when he dealt with matters that revolved around the psychological aspects of life. Coupled with traditional ways of Indian living style, he looked much further and went deep into analysing the intricacies of Indian philosophy that identified the metaphysical roots of human identification. All his novels are beautifully crafted around the vagaries and the existential problems that people faced and are often intriguing and immensely disturbing. The power packed excitement in his work often delves inside the individual probing his or her characteristics and charismatic incompetence or superiority. The characters that are being assessing various roles are generally the protagonist like Sindi Oberoi, Billy Biswas, Ratan Rathore and Som Bhaskar, who because of their individualistic nature and behaviour stand out through the author's interpretation of human psyche. He focuses on their characters with a distinct and powerful view that gives a splendid insight of their roles in his novels. But he has been seen giving equal weightage to all other characters like Meena Chatterjee, Bilasia and Mr Khemka, for richly creating an interesting dimension to all his famous novels. He has always seen wavering between the strings of detachment, that are depressing, subdued, and the strength of attachment, that involves great bonding. All his writings either deal an orientation of high action or hovers around morbid in action. An opposing hide and seek progression between love and hate, possession and, sticking to materialistic hankering and unfounded denouncement are seen moving side by side in his otherwise, most absorbing writing methodology. All the uncalled hardships and perpetual dilemma, the man faces, have been analysed after his exploration into them in depth and are portrayed through his magical trait of penning them down in black and white, the pain, sense of rejection and dejection, trauma and strengthening of spirit have been artistically woven by him, only the way he was capable of putting forth.

In "**The foreigner**" the author has been able to portray the agony and pains of loneliness and meaningless existence that leads to non attachment of all kinds due to the footlessness of one's existence. Here, he is at par with Meredith and Fitzgerald as far as the thinking strategy is involved. He opines that character build up and narration play the major role to bring out the facts and inner reality. In the novel, the author has made the protagonist's expression to be the focal point to depict his notions and he is often seen quoting snatches from the famed Bhagawad Gita, while trying to express his detachment from the worldly matters, therefore skillfully propagating the psychological characteristics in humans, and his technique has been fruitful in the expression of different thoughts and beliefs, that brings out the true reality that languishes within his knack of putting the character in a tight spot and then look out for the right option, which is truly unique and has an impact that is lasting and full of significance.

Joshi's intent can be expressed through the words he used and the narrator in **The Strange Case of Billy Biswas**. Here, the author has magically brought out the feeling of restlessness that exists and lies dormant in human mind and body. It has enhanced the author's remarkable story telling finesse to the level of utmost distinction. He has been able to give a balance between the protagonists brilliant outlook and ultimate withdrawal from the world, which is termed to be an attribute of his reflexes. Joshi is often seen telling his story by making his characters going at length in opposing each other, adding more creative punch to the matter.

**The Apprentice** has come out with the man's never ending and everlasting search for the exact meaning of life, that has always remained a big question. Also, by understanding man's predicament in reaching transcendental. The gradual transformation and progression from the unknown and hovering around, alienation to the mainstream of the civilised world and community has been beautifully explained. Joshi has also captured the essence and importance of money as well as the various corruptive methods involved in attaining the same. V.V.N. Rajender Prashad terms Apprentice to be a fictional experiment, based mostly on confessions and psycho narrative stylisation. Arun Joshi has beautifully balanced the techniques that involves consciousness, removing the always existing state of conflict in the mind of the main character. He has also exposed the obscure cult that has attained the power to rule and has given ways to self awareness and introspection.

**The Last Labyrinth** beautifully tells about the quest for one's identity that always perplexes human mind, sense of alienation and loneliness, the everlasting lust for body and searching for a social balance. The basic love angle is dramatically written and the protagonists existentialist angst and agonised state has been made believable

through his emasculate writing prowess. The restlessness in him is inherited through his parents has given a new dimension to his sharply etched tryst with his life. His characters, that comes across to us through his well designated exposure of the world that revolves around dreams and doubts that are omnipresent in various state in one's being.

## CONCLUSION

ARUN JOSHI plotted and made most of his work revolve around EXISTENTIALISM and MATERIALISM. He is often seen dealing varied forms of compromise and complacency, that was a marked delineation of the suffering of his characters faced during their periods of solitude and loneliness....One can surmise that in his novel **The Foreigner**, he highlighted alienation, In **The strange Case of Billy Biswas** and illustrated man's restlessness and futile attempts to evade it, In **The Apprentice**, he represented a different outlook for his protagonist, showing him as a marker of quintessential every man, in **The Last Labyrinth** he has put forth the never ending unrest and turbulence of a successful, yet lonely urban city dweller and in his last novel **The City and The River**, which he has given a true image of every day politics and it's uneven outcome. So broadly speaking in all his novels, he flows with the philosophical belief that each of us is responsible for our life's proceedings that is related to his own concept of our existence. Arun Joshi has used different techniques in his writing for the depiction of stories and portraying his protagonists and has been categorised as a unique novelist with specialised writing style, where all his characters are beautifully etched and are powerfully disturbing, yet fascinating in their progression shade by shade. His delving and probing into the facts related to existentialism, through identifying different characters vide their individual supremacy and flow of life, stuttering between distinguishable opposite pull between all the perennial troubles and dilemmas that involves attachment and detachment action orientation, feelings of disapproval and an acceptance has given a wide angle view through his artistic interpretation. No wonder, he is held in high esteem when the contemporary view of Indian authors, who write in English is taken into consideration. Whereas much has been spoken about the Indian form of existentialism as it is described in Bhagwad Gita and related Upanishads, where in Arun Joshi beautifully elucidate the relation and comparison between the two and defines the cultural self exclusion his spiritual quest through his novels. Further, he builds his novels around the solitary being and loneliness, where individual is forced to be staying in, while exploring the subdued world of sensibility, he is always hankering for. The traumatic experience and painful sufferings of his characters accord to one of his critics, he has beautifully explored and spoken about the middle class society, while exposing it's shallowness with his basic concern and care, thereafter telling about the psyche of individuals often shadowed under the garb of change and decayed values. Therefore, most of his novels are outcome of all the pressures and the modern civilization is undergoing, that turn them into ultra sensitive human beings, who are reeling between the vagaries of traditional and multicultural diversities.

The protagonists of Arun Joshi as per Kierkegaard philosophy choose their own way of understanding as against the universal standards drawing their own convictions and arriving at their own existential enigma having taken life's experiences. According to Albert Camus, when an individual's longing for order collides with the real world's lack of order, the result is an absurdity. Thus, all the protagonists of Arun Joshi lay in an existentialistic phenomenon in the labyrinths of life till wisdom dawns on them.

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