

# EXISTENTIALISM: A KEYNOTE IN JOSHI'S *THE FOREIGNER* AND *THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS*

**Bala Shanmuga Devi**

Asst. Professor of English  
A.P.C.Mahalaxmi College for Women  
Tuticorin.

Arun Joshi one of the most prominent Indo–English writers of Post colonial Era of Indian Literary arena, has bequeathed five novels and a collection of dozen short stories to be embedded with widened thematic and stylistic scopes. Indeed, psychology has been used as a powerful instrument by Joshi to bring out the mental aberration suffered by most of his protagonists, but not more. Though his writings superficially resemble those of Western existentialist writers who harp on the futility and negation of life and existence divine, Joshi is deeply preoccupied with bringing out the essence of Indian ethos whose role is inevitable in all facets of life not only for the ancient ones, but also for the baffled contemporary youngster, whether he be Indian or alien. There is no denying that the root of existential thoughts is traced back to pre-philosophical era. Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible, Buddhism and Upanishads, mainly all oriental concepts contain deep existential insights of communion mode, not of fragmentation and desolation. Solomon, the preacher king says in Ecclesiastes:

One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; yet the earth abideth for ever... The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the Sun... for in much wisdom is much grief; and he that increased knowledge increased sorrow... Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me. For all is vanity and vexation. (1:4)

So, bearing in mind that Existentialism in the modern context is an old wine in a new cup, a new name for an ancient method of Buddhism and Upanishads which insist only on the knowledge of self, this analysis is based on the fact that Man, being a victim of ignorance of his innate tenderness of morality becomes selfish which leads to a sense of blankness over the spirit that makes the world a waste and a vain show.

Etymologically, with its root from Latin, religion means that which binds one back to the origin, and not just following any single cult or sect. The aim of religion is spiritual, common to one and all, in spite of their individual belief system, is to discover ones' real self, ones' supreme inherent self. Hinduism deals with the process of the realization of self, one's identity after which Joshi's protagonists and main characters run after, with great anguish. One finds that Indian puranic literature, epics, and Upanishads are all full of aphorism, allegorical references, fables, prophecies, oracles, adventures of mythological mode, magical happening to such an extent that render them seemingly absurd not conforming to our

reasoning faculties. But a Hindu devotee even though illiterate derives immense spiritual sustenance and supreme truth from them.

A. Parthasarathy states (in his *The Symbolism of Hindu Gods and Rituals*) that, “Hinduism is like a hospital with its many wards, sections and divisions. Each of them has a distinct purpose to attend to particular need of a particular disease... All of them put together cater to all types of ailments of all sorts of people so that every one of them can come out of the hospital as a healthy person” (2).

Joshi also revels in furnishing his art with ample sprinkling of the methodology of our ancient *puranas* and epics by inculcating The Naked King fable in *The City and the River*, folklore of Kalapahar in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, so many motifs and archetypal symbols in *The Last Labyrinth*, Hindu mode of prayer details of ancients in Temples in almost all the novels, especially in *The Apprentice*.

No other religion in the whole of human history has developed the symbolic representation of spiritual dogmas as Hinduism, except the Old Testament and Jesus’ parables. We can boldly assert that Joshi has impressionably handled all the esoteric nuances in his masterpieces bordering on real happenings. Joshi’s great anxiety is to revive the Hindu symbols and idols of the supreme spiritual significance among the youngsters by removing from their ignorant minds the wrong notion of superstition imposed upon the artistic mode of revelation of Vedic Truth.

Precisely speaking, Joshi’s maiden novel *The Foreigner* relates the psycho aberration of Surrinder Oberoi, called Sindi throughout the novel till the misled selfish protagonist turns into Surrender Oberoi after undergoing intolerable loss out of his false brutal detachment and egoistic stand. Being orphaned at an early childhood and eventual death of his uncle, his escapade in love-affairs in his adolescence, Babu’s death, June’s demise with her child in the womb have driven Sindi mad beyond retreat. Though, at last, in his ancestor’s land, Muthu a simpleton drives firmly, the true *Karamayogic* spiritual principle bequeathed in *The Bagwad Gita* by Lord Krishna to Arjuna as well as to the whole human race in the past, present and future too.

A man owes much to the society into which he is born for having accommodated him. Evasiveness and escapism, as of Sindi never suits an honest person. One should render services in all possible and practicable ways in order to repay the dues to the world. Abandonment of all desire prompted action is true renunciation. Muthu says to Sindi persuading the latter to take up the dwindling business of Khemka saying that “sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved” (225).

The Juke box song, “Who knows where the road will lead? Only a fool can say?” (*Foreigner* 193) simply reminds us of Vedanta which reminds one of the unpredictable happenings in the realm of the Eternal, over the world.

The Hindu scriptures acknowledge experience of sorrow and turmoil one undergoes as the greatest teacher. Sindi feels sad and unhappy about his brilliant academic career that

teaches him not an iota of the realities of life. Only his failure has initiated true understanding of life to Sindi. "Where Kathy and Anna had taught me to be detached from others, June's death finally broke my attachment to myself" ( 78).

Ancient *rishis* stress that this planet is like a school, a learning place and here we suffer and grow which is also mentioned by the famous psycho-analyst Jesse Stearn in his *Matter of Immortality*. Sindi gets himself smugly accommodated with the fact that one does not choose one's involvement and that the event of life that are uncontrollable by human endeavor are of therapeutic effect. The typical confused state of a postmodern youth, who is always amidst crowds but always alone, is depicted. When June Blyth sees him for the first time in a party with all the dancing and drinking around, wherein, Sindi is the ex-officio host she asks "Why do you look so sad?" (22).

The turbulent inner world of the protagonist is delineated. He is painfully aware of "twenty-five years largely wasted in search of peace, and what did I have to show for achievement: a ten-stone body that had to be fed four times a day, twenty-five times a week. This was a sum of a lifetime of striving"( 92).

The contemplative Sindi, in spite of becoming complacent is not resigned to ignore the effect of one's desire-bound involvement that adds up to his karma. He is sure that none can escape karma, which has to be answered by every mortal. He confesses to Khemka that in the past "I have sinned, and god knows, I have paid heavily for them ... But you can't get rid of your sins by just turning me out. They will stalk you from every street corner ... We think we leave our actions behind, but the past is never dead" (229) and "it had only been a change of theatre ... the show had remained unchanged" (174).

J. Krishnamurthi states to people like Sindi that, "you are frightened to lose and you are frightened of something much greater which is to come...you think about it and by thinking about it you are creating that interval between living and that which you call death"(98).

*The Foreigner* reveals the author's keen awareness of a deeper social reality of our times. Freedom in the sense of being unfettered, freedom from the craving for holding on to things and one's ego, is the condition for love and for productive being. He later laments "Detachment at that time meant inaction. Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachments consisted of right action and not escape from it. The Gods had set a heavy price to teach me just that" (188-189). Sindi strives to walk out of his illusions.

In Joshi's other novel *The Strange case of Billy Biswas* the novelist explores the mystical urge, an ardent impulsive compulsion of the protagonist Billy Biswas, as against his brilliant academic career and belonging to a creamy upper crust of Indian elite society. Joshi utilizes Billy's strong primitive urge, a force *urkraft* to probe into the inner decay and sterility of modernism, materialism and non-abeyance with Nature, the great teacher.

Besides being a record of an existential protest against the superficialities of a grossly materialistic civilization it revels in a romantic nostalgia for the simple mode of life of the

primitive people. Both the concepts get approval from our Indian traditional ethos. In support of these essential creeds Joshi has introduced esoteric themes regarding Primordial Forces, Evolution of the universe according to Tantric system, Sankya system of union of Prakriti with Purush, impact of worlds beyond this planet upon the mortals, faceless God in ancient temples, birth and rebirth, incarnation, fate, significance of waiting, communion with nature and above all liberation from the fetters of mind consciousness reach out to the vitalizing spirit of Life.

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is a captivating story wherein Billy Biswas, with sophisticated parents, beautiful rich wife and a handsome child, just escapes into the forests and is in search of his true inner being, urged incessantly from his teens by, a mysterious clairvoyant call of a primordial force unsuppressed in spite of Billy's hectic effort. "Come, come, come, why do you want to go back? Come, now, Take us. Take us until you have had your fill. It is we who are the inheritors of the cosmic Night" (*Strange Case* 21).

The above passage is the call of Nature's primeval force that keeps on influencing Billy to enter into a trance, driving him mad being unable to explain to others what he feels inwardly. Indeed spirituality is something to be experienced, not to be explained in words that are incompetent to convey the wholeness of the experience. Billy's is the most futile cry of a man who suffers from extraordinary obsessions for primitivism which makes him insane to the onlookers. He had to chase the phantom that appears before him unknown to others, to the very ends of the earth, being unable to resist its faceless temptation.

In his struggle to get out of the rut of the degraded cultured humanity to the nature's primordial abode of infinite wisdom Billy suffers "like a fish out of water losing his staggering intelligence, spectroscopic interests, the sense of hum our snuffed out like a candle left in the rain, being primed down, like a dead butterfly". The deepest anguish felt by an aspirant, a *sadhak* is fashioned by Joshi in characterizing Billy's unrelenting quest to grab his true identity and self. The curious feeling of alienation is felt by a true seeker like Billy everywhere, making him feel like "a visitor from the wilderness to the marts of the big city and not the other way around".

Billy's soul-searching quest for identity in his questioning, "Who I am? Who are my parents" reminds us of Upanishad version of self-seeking *sadhak*. *Baktiyoga* which caters to the needs of the inquisitive but less intelligent, yet totally submissive aspirants called for devotees of the higher self. Devotees find enjoyment in paying obeisance to the Lord through hymns, sacrifices, ceremonies, rituals and celebrations, with gratitude in their heart for the infinite boons bestowed upon them. For such activities a common place of worship is needed which is called Temple. The temples mentioned in *The Strange Case Billy Biswas* are of a peculiar significance with sanctum sanctorum without idol, in the Maikala Hills, or an idol of god incomplete, devoid of face, symbolizing the incapacity of mortals to draw a face for the Almighty.

The call of Nature's primeval force keeps on influencing Billy that he cries his heart out, "in a little while I could feel the tears running down my wrists and forearms and getting

soaked into my trousers at the elbows ... I was terrified, as a child is terrified in the dark” (*Biswas* 87). Billy believes that “Life’s meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul than languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun” ( 8). One has to listen to that which has not been uttered but indicated through visions, dreams and phantoms which Billy seems to understand. But the reasons for such delusions that torment Billy are not understandable, not to be conveyed by Billy also as well others. There are quite a number of questions which had preferably been left alone, for, disaster awaits people who “see too much” (30).

Vethathri Maharishi, a great sage of modern times well-versed in Vedic literature, explains about *Yoga* and Joshi agrees with the same. The body is the outer expression of the soul. If the soul is cleared of unwanted imprints, the body would be cured of unnecessary pains and miseries. Whatever the perception that is enjoyed or experienced is always proportional to the previously conditioned character.

This experience of the soul and it’s behavior is the quality of the person. The imprint on the soul arises due to ones’ past-birth experiences. Billy reports that, “what appealed to me was the shades of the same spirit...the spirit was a much older force, older than the time when man first learned to build temples. Jess Stearns throws more light upon Karma, pre-birth and rebirth. He further states:

I myself agree, that consciousness does not depend on the existence of bodily tissues, and that death does not end consciousness. I derived this knowledge from my studies of yoga philosophies and the experience gained in meditation and its related stages” (244).

There may be more of life than that which meets the eye.

Joshi, along with many right thinking stalwarts regrets the malignant tendency of Indian youth in blindly mimicking materialism. No one is to get drunk on one’s own logic losing all value and respect for the exorbitant spiritual dimensions for Joshi believes that, generally, a person who is honestly oriented in the spiritual path gets well placed in a life of contentment and prosperity. There is only one duty and that is the duty of happiness and good work. This is the reason for our being here.

## **WORKS CITED**

### **Primary Source**

Joshi, Arun. *The Foreigner*. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1993.

---The Strange Case of Billy Biswas. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1971.

### **Secondary Sources**

Krishnamurti.J. *Talks and Dialogues* J.Krishnamurti. New York: Avon Books, 1970.

Parthasarathy.A. *The Symbolism of Hindu Gods and Rituals*. Bombay: Vedanta Life Institute, 1989.

Stearn, Jess. *Matter of Immortality*. New York: The New American Library, 1976.

### Abbreviations Used

*The Foreigner* - Foreigner

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* – Biswas.

-----

**Every man's memory is  
his private literature.**

- Aldous Huxley