

Existential Elements In Works of Arun Joshi and Albert Camus: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

Existentialism is a philosophical and literary movement of twentieth century which owes its origin to the writings of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Albert Camus (1913-1960), a French philosopher and novelist though refuted the charge of being labeled as an existentialist gave a vehement expression to existentialist thoughts and ideas in his works. Arun Joshi (1939-1993) an Indian Novelist who came on literary scene after Camus shows profound influence of Camus in his literary works. He also played a very significant role in the spread of existentialist movement and can be termed as a true inheritor of the legacy of Camus. The present paper intends to make a comparative analysis of the existentialist elements in the works of Albert Camus and Arun Joshi.

Keywords: Existentialism, vehement, legacy, inheritor, analysis

Albert Camus (1913-1960), a French philosopher and novelist and journalist was a major influence on 20th century novelists. He gave vehement expression to existential elements in his works. Although he strongly refuted the charge of being labeled as an existentialist, but no great writer would love to be labeled or restricted to a specific genre. But there is no denying the fact that existentialism is a very strong element in most of his works. His views played a huge role in the birth and rise of the philosophy known as existentialism. A careful reading of his works clearly shows the influence of existentialist theory on his works. The widespread industrialization and shifting of population from villages to the towns and suburbs, led to the

dislocation of people from their roots. This dislocation led to the sense of aloofness among humans of the times and led to the occurrence in the minds of humans the questions related to their existence. The other worldliness gave place to this worldliness and humans started to believe that they themselves were the creator of their destiny. Jean Paul Sartre in his *Existentialism and Humanism* states that, *Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be.* (*Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre 1946)

The first and foremost idea of existentialists (both theists and atheists), as adhered by Sartre, and which is the very essence of existentialism is that “existence precedes essence, or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be the starting point” (*Existentialism and Human Emotions* 13).

Sartre argues in *Existentialism is a Humanism*:

Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world- and defines himself afterwards. If man as an existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself.(349)

Camus, as a child of his age he was, he could not remain disconnected from the happenings around him and feelings and aspirations of the people around him. So impact of all these things resulted in Camus giving vent to his powerful existentialist ideas in his works. All his renowned works, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, *The Fall*, *A Happy Death* deal with existential issues. Throughout his works he shows a yearning for a better life and as a positive humanist he exhorts people to revolt after being baffled by the buffets of the absurd in their life. His revolting hero has to create personal values for himself.

Arun Joshi (1939-1993) an Indian novelist who came on literary scene after Camus shows profound influence of Camus in his literary works. In his interview with Purabi Bannerjee, Joshi, Confesses that “I read Camus and Sartre. I like *The Plague* and read *The Outsider*. I might have been influenced by them. Sartre I did not understand or like. As for existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, I have never understood except old statement” (Bannerjee 4). He also played a very significant role in the spread of existentialist movement and can be termed as a true inheritor of the legacy of Camus. Arun Joshi's all major novels *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy*

Biswas, *The Apprentice*, *The Last Labyrinth*, *The City and the bears* very close resemblance to the works of Albert Camus.

A close study of the works of both the novelists shows very conspicuous similarity between the works of both the novelists. Arun Joshi himself claimed to have read Camus deeply and influence of his master on his works is quite natural.

The first novel of Arun Joshi *The Foreigners* shows a very marked and conspicuous effect of Camus' novel *The Stranger*. *The Stranger's* main protagonist Meursault, probably the greatest existentialist character till date is the character upon whom Joshi modeled his most famous character Sindhi oberai. Meursault who is the main protagonist of the novel exemplifies the characteristics of an existential man from the beginning till the end of the novel who has no regard for social norms and shows little interest in adhering to them. He showcases the features of an existential hero as depicted in the *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He is "a man who has lived a life of the senses in total simplicity and innocent enjoyment, but whom society eventually roots out, humiliates, and crushes" (Masters 19). He has a totally indifferent attitude towards life, he believes in living in the present, believes in his personal will to make his destiny and he rebels against the established beliefs and conventions of society. He lives a life of indifference and shows no interest in what goes around his life and he does not act in accordance with society's expectations and customs. He like Camus's absurd man in *The Myth of Sisyphus* "enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules" (44). Emotionally he is a totally indifferent man who neither feels grief over his mother's death nor does he weep. The most striking example of absurdity of his character is showcased in the way he reacts to the telegram that informs him of his mother's death:

Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know. I had a telegram from the home:

'Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely.' That doesn't mean anything.

It may have been yesterday (9).

Indeed Meursault creates a strange feeling in the mind of readers when they go through his behavior. When we closely observe the character of Meursault he indeed gives a strange feeling about himself and reveals the absurdity of his character. The way he reacts to the news of his mother's death is strange but even stranger is what he does afterwards. He shows as if everything

is normal, he does not show any remorse, he boards a bus to the old people's home where his mother used to live. He takes a sound sleep during the course of his bus journey and after reaching there does not show any wish to have a look at his mother's dead body. He disinterestedly sits by the coffin, drinks coffee, smokes cigarette and even dozes off in the room where his mother's body lies. On the next day, the day of funeral, during funeral procession, he focuses solely on the weather, the sun and the landscape. He relates how he noticed that "for quite some time now the countryside had been alive with the humming of insects and the crackling of grass." (20).

Camus' Meursault is indeed an existential hero. No relationship matters for him. As he shows no guilt or sorrow over the murder of the Arab, the death of his mother, or anything else in his life, the jury comes to the conclusion that he is unfit to live and convicts him to death by the guillotine. His wholly absurd existence comes to an absurd end. So we can say that Camus's Meursault sets the stage for Arun Joshi to model Sindhi oberai's character on him. So by creating an existential hero named Meursault, Camus laid the foundation for many more writers in the years to come to model their heroes on him.

Arun Joshi's Sindhi oberai also an existential character exhibits the characteristics similar to that of Meursault. Arun Joshi's first and the most famous novel *The Foreigner* is a study of the problems of existence of Sindi Oberai. Sindi wherever he goes finds himself alone and uncomfortable. Sindi belongs to no country and to no people. He regards himself as "an uprooted young man living in later half of century" (130). He keeps moving from one place to other but feels himself a stranger everywhere. He is trapped in his own loneliness everywhere. It seems from his state that his alienation is of the soul and not of geography. Sindi Oberoi's life is a study in rootlessness. His mother was an English woman and father a Kenyan-Indian, so he is hardly Indian. His parents died in an air-crash in his early childhood. Although Sindi did not have to suffer the pangs of poverty, he felt extremely starved of the paternal love and even on many occasions he felt compelled to think of the absurdity of his existence. Sindi had lost his childhood because of the death of his parents. His being a product of a hybrid culture, and his education in Kenya, London, Boston and New York cut him off from his racial roots. So he becomes a victim of rootlessness. He was very clear and aware about the fact that he belongs to no culture and cannot call himself with confidence either an Indian or a Kenyan. In fact Sindi

Oberoi's crisis of identity rests in his soul. It has nothing to do with geographical difference. He feels himself a foreigner in Kenya, London, Boston and New Delhi. Once he tells his uncle, "I was contemplating suicide since I was tired of living" (17).

Sindi Oberoi is tossed up in his life by indecision and rootlessness. He is always faced with the crisis of his identity and quest for a solution. He feels a kind of rootlessness because of the fact that his hybrid birth did not place him anywhere. So Sindi Oberoi like Meursault is a study in rootlessness and he always seems to be dislocated from his surroundings and shows no interest in happenings around him. Sindi Oberoi is a true literary child of Meursault.

Arun Joshi's novel *The Apprentice* (1974) is greatly influenced by Camus' novel *The Fall* (1956). Both the novels are quite identical in their theme, tone and tenor. *The Fall* novel is set in Amsterdam. This novel is in the form of a dramatic monologue. It consists of a series of dramatic monologues by the self-proclaimed "judge penitent" Jean-Baptiste Clamence. During the course of the novel he delivers a series of dramatic monologues as he reflects upon his life to a stranger. Clamence narrates in detail in a confessional mode his success as a wealthy Parisian defense lawyer, he was extremely respected by his colleagues; his crisis and his ultimate "fall" from grace, which was meant to be equivalent to man's fall in the Garden of Eden.

The Fall considered by many as Camus' the greatest novel explores the themes of imprisonment, truth, innocence and nonexistence. All these elements are very dominant in existentialist philosophy. Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre considered it to be the most beautiful and the least understood of Camus' books. When we deal with *The Fall* which is one amongst Camus' short masterpieces we come across the most highly personal account of the evil which is located within the individual. Although the novel is very brief the quality of the words printed makes up for the brevity. Contrary to Meursault the main character of *The Stranger* whose drawback is that he is pursued by a blind fate and who involuntarily kills an Arab, and who is misunderstood by a hypocritical society, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the chief protagonist of *The Fall*, is guilty of a specific crime of passivity, he is morally immobile and unable to act, when needed to do so. The central event of the novel is the scene of the bridge in which he does not act and into this inertia, Camus sinks his reader into the darkness of the human condition, offering no improvements or solutions. Readers are left to make for themselves their own judgments.

While reading this novel one can feel the effort and hard work put in by Camus in producing this wonderful piece of work .

Similarly like in Camus' *The Fall*, Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice* novel is in the form of monologue. It treats of the past memories of Ratan Rathor, who narrates them to his student companion. In India, he comes into contact with Himmat Singh called Sheikh with whom he signs a deal, takes a bribe for the purchase of war material. He is arrested and remains in prison for some time. Having viewed his rapid moral downfall in the background of his glorious heritage, he becomes an apprentice to his spiritual and moral reconstruction and begins to learn how to be of some use. The setting of the novel is familiar Indian middle class society. Ratan Rathor is extremely similar to Clamence in that like him he is the hero as well as the anti- hero of the novel. Ratan Rathore also like Clamence has committed a crime which keeps on haunting him and both of them keep reflecting on their specific crime of passivity and moral downfall throughout the course of the respective novels.

The Last Labyrinth which was published in the year (1981) won Arun Joshi the India's most prestigious literary award, the Sahitya Academy Award. This novel is also written like *The Stranger* and *The Apprentice* in the first person. This novel is an uncompromising search inside the deepest recesses of the human soul and the mind. This novel is a continuation of the existential dilemma and quest undertaken by Arun Joshi in his earlier novels. This novel explores the dilemma of existence with even greater intensity and against a wider backdrop of experience. This novel is very similar to the theme of Camus's novel *A Happy Death* that money cannot buy happiness. Money alone can't do it. Arun Joshi in this novel also continues his engagement with his favorite themes of dispossession and alienation. But in this novel we find an altogether new dimension and direction in the treatment of the theme of dispossession and alienation. In this novel the spiritual dispossession and alienation of Som Bhaskar has been portrayed against the backdrop of a haunting world of life, love God and death. Som Bhaskar, a wealthy young industrialist, who is the narrator hero of this novel, relates the events of his life in flashback. Som Bhaskar who belongs to the upper strata of society has meaning of life as his quest of life. Som Bhaskar keeps on flirting from one pleasure to another and ultimately becomes the incarnation of the quest for the joy of life. He goes on in search of new experiences whether in his business or his personal affairs. But irony of the fact is that instead of attaining a sense of fulfillment; he

feels a terrible sense of voids within and voids without. "It is the voids of the world, more than its objects that bother me." (47). Everything that he finds in this mysterious world seems "a haze" to him. Som's cry of "I want, I want" (60) haunts him all the time. His search takes him to different countries and cities. It does not take him merely to old Africa but to an infinitely mysterious Benaras as well. Hec gets extremely fascinated by an obsolete world; decaying but still urbane – the world of Aftab and Anuradha- and by the labyrinths of the Haveli they inhabit. The novel is dealing with the theme of alienation, the absurd, the sordidness and seediness of the human existence. The novel also deals with the problems related to the academic and the industrial world. *The Last Labyrinth* is a quest for meaning in life and function of Karmayoga. The narrative located mainly in Bombay and Benares; is an account of Som Bhaskar's business deals and love-story. It is running alongside with Som Bhaskar's crisis of identity.

Som Bhaskar carries with him a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism, and perceives himself to be in a hostile world which is one side but other side is totally opposite. Som Bhaskar has been depicted as a modern Hamlet whose problem is whether to become spiritualistic or materialistic and probes his turbulent inner world. He is extremely torn by the inner contradictions and his consciousness keeps wandering in a maze of opposite impulses. He feels an emptiness and restlessness despite having everything. He feels himself to be a rootless person. *The Last Labyrinth*, thus, depicts and portrays the existential despair in the character of Som Bhaskar. Thus, *The Last Labyrinth* deals like *A Happy Death* with the sense of alienation, rootlessness; it also deals like *A Happy Death* with the theme of wish for a happy life.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1971) is also a very famous existential novel by Arun Joshi. Billy seeks a world impure by hypocrisy and selfishness. When he comes to terms with his life he finds himself a misfit, misplaced and does not enjoy the role he has earned for himself by virtue of his parentage and education. He is unable to find happiness anywhere. He finds happiness neither in teaching nor in family. He is extremely dissatisfied with the modern civilized culture. He realizes that the harder he may try all his efforts to integrate with society are futile; these are simply adding to his restlessness. The narrator Romi highlights the deep desire of Billy to know the roots of man's existence. Billy's interest in studying anthropology was mooted by this near obsession to go down the tribal areas. It helps Romi frame the view that the so-called civilized society has wrought havoc upon the hypersensitive mind of Billy choked by

the atmosphere of the phoney society. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) is “yet another variation on the paradigmatic pattern of the doomed existential quest for values in a mad, bad, absurd world” (Guruprasad 161). Billy’s tragedy lies in the fact that his awareness of the deeper layers of his personality makes him an existentialist being, who is estranged from the superficial reality of life.

So to conclude we can say that Albert Camus’ impact on the works of Arun Joshi is quite explicit and conspicuous. Joshi incorporated the themes, contents, feelings and emotions of the works of Camus in all his works. Camus, as he is known and exhibits through his works, is the father figure in the realm of existentialist fiction and Arun Joshi is the earnest follower and torchbearer of his legacy.

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