

# Philosophical and Psychological Dimensions of Materialism and Spiritualism in Arun Joshi's Novels

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## Abstract

Arun Joshi's novels delve into the existential conflicts between materialism and spiritualism, presenting protagonists who struggle to reconcile their worldly pursuits with their deeper, often unfulfilled, spiritual yearnings. This study explores whether Joshi's protagonists achieve spiritual fulfillment, the philosophical significance of their ambiguous endings, and the lessons his works offer to contemporary society. Through a close analysis of *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, *The Last Labyrinth*, and *The Apprentice*, this paper examines the psychological and philosophical dilemmas that shape the characters' journeys. Despite their attempts at transcendence, these protagonists remain trapped in existential uncertainties, underscoring the challenges of attaining spiritual fulfillment in a materialistic world. The ambiguous conclusions of Joshi's novels reinforce the complexities of human existence, aligning with existentialist philosophies that reject absolute resolutions. Furthermore, Joshi's narratives serve as cautionary tales for modern society, emphasizing the importance of integrating ethical and introspective dimensions into one's life rather than succumbing to either extreme materialism or absolute renunciation. This study highlights how Joshi's works remain relevant in today's fast-paced, consumer-driven world, offering insights into the timeless struggle for meaning and fulfillment.

**Keywords:** *Materialism, Spiritualism, Existentialism, Arun Joshi, Philosophical Literature.*

## 1. Introduction

Modern society is characterized by an increasing emphasis on material acquisition, often at the expense of spiritual and existential well-being. This widening gap between material pursuits and spiritual fulfillment presents a significant societal problem. The relentless pursuit of wealth, status, and consumer goods has led to a sense of alienation, moral ambiguity, and a profound lack of meaning for many individuals. This phenomenon is particularly acute in rapidly

developing economies where the allure of material success can overshadow traditional values and ethical considerations. The consequence is a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction, despite material abundance, leading to psychological distress and a search for deeper meaning. This problem is not merely an individual concern, but a societal one, impacting social cohesion, ethical conduct, and overall well-being. The study of this gap is critical to understanding the underlying causes of modern existential anxieties and to exploring potential pathways towards a more balanced and fulfilling existence.

## Arun Joshi as a Novelist of Existential and Philosophical Conflicts

Arun Joshi's novels serve as a poignant exploration of existential and philosophical conflicts that arise from the clash between modernity and traditional values. His characters are often caught in a web of alienation, searching for meaning and identity in a rapidly changing world. Joshi's narratives delve into the inner turmoil of individuals grappling with moral dilemmas, spiritual emptiness, and the loss of traditional moorings. He masterfully portrays the psychological landscape of characters who are disillusioned with the superficiality of material pursuits and yearn for a deeper connection with themselves and the world around them. Through his nuanced characterizations and introspective narratives, Joshi illuminates the human condition, revealing the universal struggle to find purpose and authenticity in an increasingly complex and fragmented society. His work is a significant contribution to Indian English literature, offering profound insights into the existential anxieties and philosophical questions that define the modern human experience.

## Examining Psychological and Philosophical Insights in His Novels

The primary objective of this study is to examine the psychological and philosophical insights embedded within Arun Joshi's novels. This involves a detailed analysis of his characters' inner lives, their struggles with alienation and disillusionment, and their quest for spiritual meaning. The study aims to identify the recurring themes and motifs that reflect Joshi's exploration of existential anxieties and moral dilemmas. Furthermore, it seeks to explore the

philosophical underpinnings of his narratives, examining how his characters grapple with questions of identity, purpose, and the nature of reality. By analyzing Joshi's use of symbolism, narrative structure, and character development, the study will illuminate the psychological and philosophical dimensions of his work. Ultimately, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of Joshi's contribution to Indian English literature and his enduring relevance in addressing the fundamental questions of human existence.

## 2. Existentialism and Spiritual Crisis in Arun Joshi's Works

### *Influence of Existentialist Thinkers like Sartre, Camus, and Kierkegaard*

Arun Joshi's novels deeply resonate with existentialist themes, drawing significant influence from thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard. Sartre's notion of existential freedom, which emphasizes the individual's responsibility for creating meaning in a meaningless world, is reflected in Joshi's protagonists, who struggle to define their existence beyond material pursuits (Khanday & Paliwal, 2023). Camus' philosophy of the absurd, particularly the conflict between human longing for meaning and the indifferent universe, is evident in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, where Billy abandons a successful life in pursuit of an elusive spiritual fulfillment (Venkateswarlu, 2017). Similarly, Kierkegaard's concept of the 'leap of faith' finds parallels in *The Last Labyrinth*, where Som Bhaskar oscillates between obsessive material desire and an abstract yearning for transcendence (Rani, 2020). Through these influences, Joshi constructs a literary world where existential dilemmas take center stage, highlighting the tension between materialism and spiritualism.

### *Role of Fate, Free Will, and Existential Angst in Character Development*

The interplay of fate, free will, and existential angst is a defining feature of Joshi's literary world, shaping the psychological and philosophical dimensions of his characters. In *The Foreigner*, Sindi Oberoi grapples with existential alienation, embodying Sartre's belief that individuals are "condemned to be free," yet remain burdened by their choices (Paul, 2006). Similarly, in *The Apprentice*, Ratan Rathor's ethical dilemmas underscore the weight of free will, as his choices lead to deep moral disillusionment, mirroring Camus' exploration of guilt and responsibility (Sharma, 2004). The notion of fate also plays a crucial role, as characters like Billy Biswas seem trapped by their existential longings, unable to reconcile their spiritual aspirations with societal expectations (Anish & Georshia, 2020). Joshi thus presents a complex

psychological landscape where characters struggle between the autonomy of free will and the perceived inevitability of fate, leading to profound existential turmoil.

### *Psychological Turmoil in Protagonists Torn Between Materialism and Spiritualism*

Joshi's protagonists embody the psychological conflict between material ambition and spiritual yearning, reflecting the broader existential crisis of modern individuals. In *The Last Labyrinth*, Som Bhaskar's obsession with wealth and power ultimately leads him into a metaphysical labyrinth, where material success fails to provide existential fulfillment (Sharma, 2021). Similarly, Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner* experiences deep emotional detachment, indicative of a soul caught between the allure of worldly pleasures and a desire for inner peace (Singh, 2001). Billy Biswas, in his pursuit of tribal simplicity, represents a radical rejection of materialistic urban life, yet his quest remains unresolved, highlighting the inescapable tension between the two realms (Chauhan, 2023). Through these portrayals, Joshi critiques the modern obsession with material wealth, advocating instead for a more introspective, spiritually aware existence that aligns with traditional Indian philosophical thought.

## 3. Psychological Portraits of Joshi's Protagonists

### *Sindi Oberoi (The Foreigner): Identity Crisis and Emotional Detachment*

Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* (1968) presents Sindi Oberoi as an expatriate protagonist struggling with an intense identity crisis and emotional detachment. Born to an Indian father and an English mother, Sindi is raised in Kenya before moving to the United States, leading to a fragmented sense of belonging. His existential struggle revolves around his inability to forge meaningful relationships, as he remains emotionally distant from those around him. His detachment can be understood through the existentialist lens of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who argue that individuals construct their own essence in a meaningless world (Khanday and Paliwal, 2023). Oberoi's reluctance to commit to love and friendship reflects his belief in detachment as a way to avoid suffering (Jayappa, 2023). Sindi's relationships with June Blyth and Babu further highlight his emotional disengagement. He rationalizes his unwillingness to commit to June by arguing that attachment leads to suffering, a concept rooted in Buddhist philosophy. However, his eventual realization of love's significance comes too late, as June dies in an accident, leaving him in remorse (Paul, 2006). Scholars argue that Sindi embodies Joshi's thematic preoccupation with the futility of material success and the hollowness of Western individualism

(Chauhan, 2023). His journey ultimately mirrors that of Camus's *The Stranger*, where emotional alienation prevents the protagonist from forming deep bonds (Oberoi, 2021).

*Billy Biswas (The Strange Case of Billy Biswas): Psychological Escape from Urban Alienation*

Billy Biswas, the protagonist of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), represents a man disillusioned with urban life who seeks psychological refuge in tribal existence. As a highly educated anthropologist, Billy grows increasingly alienated from the artificiality and materialism of elite urban society. His journey into the tribal world reflects Joshi's critique of modernity's failure to provide genuine fulfillment (Anish and Georshia, 2020). Scholars note that Billy's character aligns with existentialist thought, where the search for authenticity necessitates a break from societal norms (Rani, 2020). Billy's decision to abandon his privileged life and integrate into a tribal community is a radical rejection of modern civilization's superficiality. Critics argue that this transition symbolizes a return to primitive wisdom and spiritual harmony, reminiscent of Rousseau's "noble savage" concept (Sharma, 2020). However, his fate underscores the incompatibility of these two worlds—his attempt at self-exile ultimately results in his tragic demise, reinforcing the existential belief that true escape is unattainable (Dhawan, 1986).

*Som Bhaskar (The Last Labyrinth): Obsession, Desire, and Metaphysical Search*

Som Bhaskar, the protagonist of *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), epitomizes existential turmoil driven by obsession and metaphysical inquiry. Unlike Sindi Oberoi or Billy Biswas, Som is financially successful but spiritually tormented. His relentless pursuit of Anuradha, a mysterious woman, symbolizes his quest for something beyond materialism—a labyrinthine search for existential meaning (Singh, 2001). Scholars interpret Som's obsessive desires as reflective of Joshi's critique of unchecked ambition, where the more one possesses, the more one craves (Pradhan, 1985). Som's journey is reminiscent of the protagonists in Dostoevsky's and Kafka's works, where the individual is trapped in an endless cycle of doubt and yearning (Sharma, 1985). His dissatisfaction with wealth and power suggests that material prosperity alone cannot provide meaning. The novel's ambiguous conclusion leaves readers questioning whether fulfillment is attainable or whether, like Som, they are doomed to perpetual seeking (Pathak, 1992).

*Ratan Rathor (The Apprentice): Moral Dilemmas and Ethical Corruption*

In *The Apprentice* (1974), Ratan Rathor navigates moral dilemmas and ethical corruption, illustrating Joshi's preoccupation with post-independence India's moral decay. Ratan begins as an idealistic youth but succumbs to bureaucratic corruption, highlighting how

systemic moral compromise shapes individual choices (Naik, 1984). His retrospective narration serves as a confession, a desperate attempt to reconcile with his conscience (Sharma, 1983). Ratan's journey resonates with the themes of guilt and redemption found in Sartre's and Camus's existentialist literature. His realization that power and wealth cannot replace inner peace parallels themes in *Crime and Punishment*, where moral transgressions lead to psychological torment (Paul, 2006). His ultimate self-awareness suggests that the battle between materialism and spiritualism is intrinsic to human nature, and true redemption lies in self-acceptance (Rani, 2020).

## 4. Social and Cultural Influences on Materialism and Spiritualism

*The Role of Westernization and Economic Progress in Shaping Materialistic Attitudes*

Westernization and economic progress have played a crucial role in shaping materialistic attitudes in contemporary Indian society. With globalization and rapid economic growth, India has witnessed a shift from traditional spiritual values toward a more materialistic and consumer-driven culture. Arun Joshi's novels reflect this transformation through his protagonists, who struggle to balance modern aspirations with deeper existential questions (Khanday & Paliwal, 2023). In *The Foreigner*, Sindi Oberoi is torn between his globalized upbringing and the search for inner peace, illustrating the psychological conflicts induced by Western materialism (Yadav, 2013). Economic development, particularly in post-liberalization India, has fueled desires for wealth accumulation and social status, overshadowing the significance of spiritual fulfillment. Scholars argue that the influence of Western capitalism has led individuals to equate success with financial prosperity, often at the cost of emotional and moral well-being (Paul, 2006). This is evident in *The Last Labyrinth*, where Som Bhaskar is obsessed with power and material possessions but remains deeply dissatisfied, representing the emptiness of consumerism (Rani, 2020). Through his existential themes, Joshi critiques the modern pursuit of success as a hollow endeavor that distances individuals from their true selves (Anish & Georshia, 2020).

Despite economic advancements, the psychological cost of materialism is evident in increased alienation and identity crises among individuals (Chauhan, 2023). This shift is further exacerbated by the media and corporate culture, which continuously promote material success as the ultimate goal of life (Oberoi, 2021). Arun Joshi's works highlight this disillusionment, presenting characters who, despite their achievements, struggle with an existential void,



emphasizing that economic progress alone cannot guarantee true happiness (Sharma, 2020). *Traditional Indian Values and Spiritual Teachings as a Counterforce*

While Westernization has introduced materialistic tendencies, traditional Indian values and spiritual teachings continue to serve as a counterforce. The Indian philosophical tradition, deeply rooted in concepts like Dharma, Karma, and Moksha, offers an alternative worldview that prioritizes self-realization over material gains (Naik, 1984). Arun Joshi incorporates these themes into his novels, where characters often turn to spiritual introspection in moments of crisis. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Billy rejects urban materialism to embrace tribal life, symbolizing the enduring influence of Indian spirituality as an escape from societal corruption (Pradhan, 1985). Indian mysticism, yoga, and Vedantic philosophy emphasize inner peace and detachment from worldly desires, which contrast sharply with Western consumerism. Joshi's protagonists often struggle with this dichotomy, seeking refuge in Eastern spiritual traditions as a means to resolve their existential dilemmas (Pathak, 1992). This is evident in *The Apprentice*, where Ratan Rathor's moral conflicts lead him to question his unethical actions, ultimately realizing that spiritual discipline is essential for redemption (Dhawan, 1986). The novels suggest that Indian spiritual heritage offers a pathway to self-discovery, countering the dissatisfaction caused by material pursuits (Sharma, 1983).

Furthermore, religious and philosophical texts such as the Bhagavad Gita advocate the principle of selfless action (Nishkama Karma), which directly opposes materialistic self-interest. This ideological conflict is portrayed in *The Foreigner*, where Sindi's journey represents the struggle to reconcile personal ambitions with selflessness (Rani, 2020). Joshi's narratives underscore that while modernization is inevitable, traditional Indian spirituality remains a guiding force for those disillusioned by material excess (Singh, 2001).

## The Conflict Between Ambition and Renunciation in Post-Colonial India

The tension between ambition and renunciation has been a defining feature of post-colonial India, reflecting the country's struggle to balance economic progress with its spiritual legacy. As India transitioned into an independent nation, the desire for economic self-sufficiency and global integration often clashed with its deep-rooted spiritual ethos (Paul, 2006). Arun Joshi's works explore this conflict by portraying characters who experience an internal struggle between their worldly ambitions and the desire for inner peace. In *The Last Labyrinth*, Som Bhaskar's pursuit of material power is constantly overshadowed by his quest for metaphysical understanding,

illustrating the paradox of modern Indian existence (Sharma, 2020). Ambition, when unchecked, can lead to moral corruption, a theme Joshi explores through Ratan Rathor's ethical dilemmas in *The Apprentice*. Rathor's choices reflect the broader societal shift where professional success is often prioritized over ethical values, a consequence of post-colonial India's economic aspirations (Dhawan, 1986). However, Joshi does not present a binary opposition between ambition and renunciation; rather, he suggests that a harmonious balance between material success and spiritual consciousness is necessary for holistic well-being (Pradhan, 1985).

The conflict is also evident in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, where Billy's rejection of elite society in favor of tribal simplicity highlights the existential crisis faced by many Indians caught between modern ambition and traditional renunciation (Anish & Georshia, 2020). Joshi critiques the notion that success equates to happiness, instead proposing that a return to one's roots and spiritual introspection can lead to true fulfillment (Khanday & Paliwal, 2023). Ultimately, Joshi's works suggest that the reconciliation of ambition and renunciation requires a re-evaluation of priorities. By integrating spiritual wisdom with economic aspirations, individuals can avoid the existential emptiness that often accompanies unchecked material pursuits (Chauhan, 2023). His novels serve as a reminder that while ambition drives progress, renunciation provides the inner clarity necessary to navigate life's complexities (Singh, 2001).

## 5. Resolution or Continued Struggle?

### *The Ambiguous Endings and Their Philosophical Significance*

Joshi's novels conclude on ambiguous notes, reinforcing existential uncertainty and the complexity of human struggles. In *The Foreigner*, Sindi does not reach a definitive resolution regarding his detachment; his departure is open-ended, symbolizing the unresolved tension between material success and emotional/spiritual fulfillment (Sharma, 2021). *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* ends with Billy's tragic death, leaving readers to ponder whether his rejection of modernity was truly liberating or merely another form of escapism (Pathak, 1992). His fate underscores the peril of resisting societal norms and raises questions about whether absolute spiritual liberation is feasible within a materialistic society (Dhawan, 1986). In *The Last Labyrinth*, the novel's cryptic conclusion—"I did not know. Perhaps I would never know."—mirrors the existential uncertainty that pervades Joshi's works (Naik, 1984). This reflects Sartrean existentialist ideas, where the search for meaning is perpetual and inconclusive (Chauhan, 2023). Likewise, Ratan Rathor's ending in *The*

Apprentice offers no clear redemption; his remorse is evident, but the extent of his transformation remains uncertain (Sharma, 1985). Joshi's use of ambiguous endings aligns with existentialist philosophy, emphasizing that spiritual fulfillment is neither absolute nor easily attainable.

## *Lessons for Contemporary Society on Achieving Balance Between Material and Spiritual Aspirations*

Joshi's works offer profound lessons for modern society, which continues to grapple with the balance between material pursuits and spiritual well-being. The alienation experienced by his protagonists echoes contemporary dilemmas, where individuals, despite professional success, feel disconnected and unfulfilled (Jayappa, 2023). The economic and technological advancements of the modern world have amplified materialistic tendencies, often at the cost of emotional and spiritual well-being. Joshi's novels suggest that blind ambition and wealth accumulation do not necessarily lead to happiness. Instead, a conscious effort to embrace introspection, ethical integrity, and emotional connections is required for true fulfillment (Rani, 2020). Billy Biswas's rejection of urban life serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of excessive materialism, yet his tragic end also warns against complete detachment from society (Paul, 2006). Similarly, Som Bhaskar's obsessive pursuit of the metaphysical reminds us that spiritual yearning, if driven by egotistical desires, can be as destructive as material greed (Pradhan, 1985). Joshi's works advocate for a middle path, where individuals must integrate spiritual awareness into their daily lives rather than seeking extreme renunciation. This resonates with ancient Indian philosophies that promote balance—such as the Bhagavad Gita's concept of *karma yoga*, which advocates detached action and mindful living (Singh, 2001).

## 6. Conclusion

Arun Joshi's novels encapsulate the ceaseless conflict between material ambitions and spiritual quests, reflecting the broader existential dilemmas of modern individuals. His protagonists, whether Sindi Oberoi, Billy Biswas, Som Bhaskar, or Ratan Rathor, embark on journeys marked by internal struggles, moral crises, and unfulfilled aspirations. While each character seeks an escape from the material world, their paths remain uncertain, reinforcing the notion that spiritual fulfillment is neither absolute nor easily attainable. The ambiguous endings of these novels further emphasize the unresolved nature of existential conflicts, aligning with philosophical traditions that reject definitive answers to human dilemmas. Joshi's works remain profoundly relevant in contemporary society, where the relentless pursuit of material success often leads to emotional detachment and existential angst. His narratives serve as a reminder

that true fulfillment lies not in extreme renunciation or unbridled ambition but in achieving a delicate balance between the two. The lessons from Joshi's novels encourage a more introspective approach to life, advocating for ethical awareness, emotional depth, and a meaningful engagement with both the material and spiritual dimensions of existence. As the world continues to grapple with consumerism, alienation, and moral ambiguity, Joshi's literature offers a compelling framework for understanding and addressing these enduring human concerns.

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