Introduction

Existentialism in Postcolonial Indian English Fiction

*Søren Kierkegaard* is generally considered to be the first existentialist philosopher however, existentialism became a well-known philosophical movement by the works of two French writers, *Jean-Paul Sartre* and *Albert Camus*. As a philosophic idealism, existentialism gradually developed into a powerful revolt against reason, rationality, positivism and the traditional ways in which early philosopher portrayed man. Man’s freedom, his assertion of his subjective self, his flouting of reason and rationality, his denial of traditional values, institutions and philosophy, his exercise of will and freedom, and his experience of the absurdity and the nothingness of life are some of the existential themes, which are reflected in the writings of the exponents of existentialism.

Postcolonial Indian English literature (or New English literature(s)), is the emergence of new consciousness, of new awareness of thought and self-expression, that came into existence around the middle of the 20th century. However, post-colonialism literature is inclusive of the colonial time as well as the time after colonizaton. The basic idea of this process is the deconstruction of old-fashioned perceptions and attitudes of power and oppression that were adopted during the time of colonialism. Post-colonialism also deals with conflicts of identity and cultural belonging. Colonial powers came to foreign states and destroyed main parts of native tradition and culture; furthermore, they continuously replaced them with their own ones. This often led to conflicts when countries became independent and suddenly faced the challenge of developing a new nationwide identity and self-confidence.

Imbibing of the new ideas and concepts and gaining a new imaginative fillip from the achievement of earlier writers is integral to the blossoming of artistic instinct and Arun Joshi’s case best illustrates this. It is more in the nature of exploring ‘fresh woods and pastures new’ rather than of servile imitation that writers like Arun Joshi draw freely from continental writers like Kafka and Camus. Arun Joshi’s choice of themes like expansion of the human spirit in the atmosphere of freedom, agony of the lonely soul lost in a hostile world etc., typify universal experiences rather than national or cultural idiosyncrasies.
Arun Joshi occupies a distinctive place in the post colonial history of Indian English novel. Among the Indian English writers who qualify as existentialist, Arun Joshi is the first and finest one. His novels are strongly influenced by the existential philosophy of Satre, Albert Camus’ and Kierkegaard. As a novelist he is also a profound thinker, his concerns are different. He writes about the destruction of man’s native innocence by experience, about his rootlessness, restlessness and existential dilemma, about the crisis of his identity in the present day world. His journey of fictional works from the Foreigner (1968) to The City and the River (1990) is characterized by themes of frustration, disintegration, rootlessness, a sense of alienation and existential predicament.

The basic existential tenet that living or actual existence is more important than theories of life is amply verified in the destinies of Arun Joshi’s characters. Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist of The Foreigner learns the hard way that ‘foreignness’ is more a state of mind than an alien ness caused by the accident of birth in any particular country. In The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas Arun Joshi seems to give a further extension to the theme of alienation he dealt with in The Foreigner. The Strange Case of Billy Biswas by the late Arun Joshi is a delightful book about a typically privileged young Indian, Billy Biswas, son of a Supreme Court Judge, educated at Doon School, St. Stephens and Columbia University, New York, who abandons an engineering degree in favour of anthropology and, on his return to India, is eventually seduced by the mystical and sensual lure of tribal life in the hills and jungles of Chhatisgarh. The ambiguity of the title The Last Labyrinth augments the novel’s existential by converging various layers of meaning in accordance with the change wrought both in the external scene and the increase in awareness of the characters. The City and the River (1990), is a study of existential predicament of its prominent characters. The prominent characters in it carry with them a sense of alienation, loneliness and pessimism. There is a continuum of existential thought in all the novels discussed above with regard to their explicit or implicit suggestion. Critical reaction to the protagonists in

Arun Joshi’s novels show a wide variety, ranging from downright denunciation to enthusiastic eulogizing. Each of his novels offers interesting explorations of unavoidable conflicts between inner needs and external social and moral norms. A need dimension to the sovereignty of individuality is offered in his novels by linking it with a courageous rallying round of psychological reserves of endurance and hope.

Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri are easily the best exponents of existentialism in Indo English fiction. They do not bother about giving elaborate details of social settings as they study man more as a victim of his own inner environment rather
than of the external material or moral climate. Their characters are more concerned with their own highly sensitized world of sense and sensibility than with the average Indian’s greatest problem of all-keeping body and soul together. Each one of these novelists is highly realistic in so far as he or she captures both the agony and ecstasy of an essentially subjective response to the passing panorama of life. For all their erratic behaviour and whimsicality the protagonists in the novels of these writers are sincere and courageous, forgoing the easier path of obedience to an external code and opting to make their own feelings the operative principle guiding their destinies. The non-availability of a moral reference point outside their inner natures is at once a proof of these protagonists’ strength and the enormity of their burden of loneliness in having to win their own scheme of values.

Anita Desai exhibits a strong inclination towards the existentialist interpretation of the human predicament. In particular, she voices the silent miseries and helplessness of married women tormented by existentialist angst. The problem of the tragic tension between the individual and their unfavourable environment acquires the dimensions of existential angst. Her novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, deals with the existential angst experienced by the female protagonist Nanda Kaul, an old lady living in isolation. It also projects the inner turmoil of a small girl, Raka, who is haunted by a sense of futility. Thirdly, it presents the plight of a helpless woman, Ila Das who is in conflict with forces that are too powerful to be encountered, resulting in her tragic death. Thus, the existential themes of solitude, alienation, the futility of human existence and struggle for survival form the major themes of the novel. *Cry The Peacock* is about Maya, a hypersensitive woman who cannot cope with the practical world of her husband and feels dejected, lonely and demoralized, resulting in the ultimate catastrophe, she kills the husband out of frustration.

Jhumpa Lahiri in *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) writes eloquently about the immigrant experience and about the divide between cultures, examining both the difficulties and joys of assimilation. These immensely personal stories form, in one critic's opinion, a story cycle. Overarching themes and narrative styles culminate in an exploration of the Indian and Indian-American experience, through the eyes of a multitude of characters grappling with themes of identity, ethnicity, love, and culture. Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* (2003) is extraordinarily subtle in its existential concerns. It echoes the existential angst of disillusionment and despairs, loneliness and alienation of Ashima, Ashoke Ganguli and Gogol. Almost all the existentialists show a concern with the problem of man, his existence, freedom and choice and responsibility in every field. They identify that man in the modern age has been dehumanized by being deprived of his freedom.