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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE FRAGMENTED SELF IN ARUN JOSHI'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT
Arun Joshi (1939–1993) occupies a distinctive place in Indian English fiction as a novelist of inner crisis. This article inspects his first two novels, The Foreigner (1968) and The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1971), as studies of the fragmented self. Drawing on existentialist concept and R. D. Laing's account of the divided self, it contends that both protagonists suffer from a split between an outer social identity and an inner self that finds no home in the world. Sindi Oberoi, an orphan of diverse and varied parentage educated across three continents, defends himself against involvement through a philosophy of detachment that turns out to be a disguised fear of relationships; his alienation lies within him instead than in any place. Billy Biswas, the son of a sole Delhi family, suppresses a potent attraction to rudimentary life until it breaks through his marriage and career and drives him to abandon civilisation for a tribal community. The article shows that Joshi offers two contrasting responses to the fragmented self: Sindi's slow reintegration through reliable action, and Billy's radical flight, which ends in his devastation. Together the novels offer alienation as a psychological and spiritual state of the modern Indian intellectual, caught between Western rationality and the call of a deeper, unacknowledged self.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, The Foreigner, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, alienation, identity crisis, divided self, existentialism, detachment, primitivism, Indian English fiction

Indian English fiction of the 1960s and 1970s turned increasingly from public history to private awareness. Among the writers who led this turn, Arun Joshi persists out for his sustained interest in the inner life of the educated, uprooted individual. His protagonists are not victims of poverty or policy-related oppression; they are privileged, extremely educated men who however feel that a thing vital and indispensable and fundamental is missing from their lives. They move between continents, careers and connections without discovering a place where they belong.

Joshi's first two novels, *The Foreigner* (1968) and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), offer this condition with distinct and individual intensity. Sindi Oberoi, the narrator of The Foreigner, is a youthful

engineer who feels like a stranger wherever he goes. Billy Biswas, seen through the eyes of his friend Romi, is a brilliant anthropologist who abandons his family and career to live among the tribes of main India. On the surface the two men are opposites: Sindi withdraws from participation, while Billy plunges into a passionate search for a lost self. This article argues that both are versions of the same figure, the fragmented self, in whom a socially acceptable outer identity covers a hidden inner self that can not be conveyed. Their alienation is less a matter of geography or culture than of mental segment, and Joshi's two novels explore two feasible responses to it: reintegration and flight.

The idea of alienation has a long history in modern concept. Existentialist philosophers from Kierkegaard to Sartre and Camus described the human being as thrown into a world without given meaning, compelled to create an identity through option and action. Alienation in this sense is not simply loneliness; it is the experience of being estranged from society, from another people and eventually from oneself. Critics of Joshi have drawn heavily on this tradition. R. Rajmohan, for instance, identifies three interlinked forms of alienation in Joshi's novels, from the self, from fellow human beings and from the world, and contends that Joshi's heroes pass through all three (40).

A second, mental framework is offered by R. D. Laing's The Divided Self. Laing describes the ontologically insecure person, who lacks a firm sense of his own actuality and identity. Such a person frequently experiences adjacent connections as a threat of being engulfed and replies by withdrawing behind a false outer self that handles with the world while the true self remains hidden and separated. This model illuminates both of Joshi's protagonists. Sindi's detachment and Billy's double life as a respectable professor and a secret rudimentary is versions of the split Laing describes, in which the social self and the inner self no longer communicate. Joshi moreover brings an Indian philosophical dimension to the problem. Both novels engage with the Bhagavad Gita's teaching of action without attachment, testing whether detachment can be a path to freedom or merely a disguise for fear. The fragmented self in Joshi's fiction is thus shaped by Western existential anxiety, by the psychology of the divided personality and by an Indian search for spiritual wholeness.

Sindi Oberoi's biography reads like a catalogue of displacement. Born in Kenya to an Indian father and an English mother, he is orphaned at the age of four and raised by an uncle who furthermore dies. He studies in London, drifts through odd jobs in England and Scotland, and completes a doctorate in engineering in the United States before ultimately moving to Delhi. He belongs to no country, no religion and no family. M. Tulasi locates the source of his state in this loss of parental love and contends that Sindi, who starts as a victim of alienation, "becomes the embodiment of alienation, through the process of internalization" (27).

Sindi himself recognises that his problem is not geographical. Reflecting on his life in America, he concludes that he would have been a stranger anywhere: "My foreignness lay within me and I couldn't leave myself behind wherever I went" (*Foreigner* 58). The sentence is the key to the novel. Sindi's alienation is inherent and essential, a fracture in the self that travels with him from continent to continent. Chidambar L. Patil consequently describes him as a man who sees himself as "the nowhere man" of the world (16).

To defend this fractured self, Sindi develops a philosophy of detachment. Influenced by conversations with a priest in Scotland and by his own reading, he persuades himself that true love must be free of desire and possession. In practice, however, detachment becomes a way of avoiding obligation. He loves June Blyth but refuses to marry her, telling her: "We are alone, both you and I. That is the problem" (*Foreigner* 115). In Laing's conditions, Sindi fears that intimacy will engulf him, so he keeps his true self hidden behind a cool, reasonable surface. The effects are disastrous. June turns to his friend Babu Khemka, Sindi interferes, and the

affair ends with Babu's demise in a car crash and June's demise during an abortion.

These deaths force Sindi to confront the emptiness of his philosophy. Back in India, working for Babu's father, he faces a conclusive and definitive test when Mr. Khemka is arrested for financial dishonesty and the firm's workers face ruin. Persuaded by Muthu, a humble clerk, Sindi decides to stay and run the business. He now understands his earlier error: "Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it" (*Foreigner* 177). As Suneeta Arya and Barkha Rautela observe, Muthu makes Sindi see that "his genuine alienation is from himself, not the world" (275). Sindi does not develop whole overnight, but the novel ends with the start of reintegration. The divided self starts to heal through trustworthy involvement with others.

Where Sindi lacks roots, Billy Biswas has too countless of them. His grandfather was a primary minister of a princely state, his father becomes a judge of the Supreme Court, and Billy himself is sent to America to study engineering. Yet from adolescence he has felt the pull of a distinct world. In New York he secretly changes his topic to anthropology and chooses to live in Harlem, explaining that "White America" was "significantly too civilized for me" (*Billy Biswas* 9). His friend Romi, who narrates the novel, believes that the meaning of Billy's life lay "in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul" (8) alternatively than in the polished surfaces of social success.

Billy's life in Delhi after his return is a study in suppression. Hoping to anchor himself, he marries Meena, a fashionable youthful woman who values money and status, and becomes a lecturer at Delhi University. The marriage merely deepens his partition. He sees the elegant guests at his wife's parties turning into animals before his eyes, and he feels unable to explain himself to any person: "To speak, I am afraid, is to address the deaf" (*Billy Biswas* 98). His outer self performs the functions of husband, father and academic, while his inner self increases more desperate. Tanu Gupta and Himani Aggarwal observe that Billy "becomes a split personality between the civilized and primitive" (198).

The split ultimately breaks open. Billy seduces Rima Kaul, a vulnerable young woman, and is horrified by what he has developed. He interprets the episode as a caution from the self he has denied. On an anthropological expedition to the Maikala hills, the inner self takes over completely. Billy later describes the experience as a stripping away of every civilised layer, "until nothing but my rudimentary self was left trembling" (*Billy Biswas* 121). He disappears into the forest and lives for years with a tribal community, acquiring Bilasia, a tribal woman who embodies the force that has called him all his life, as his companion.

Rajmohan reads Billy as a figure who "regresses into the old value system to find his identity" (42). The word regresses captures the ambiguity of Billy's quest. He achieves a kind of wholeness among the tribals, but just by cutting himself off entirely from the civilised world and from his duties to his wife and son. When Romi, now a district official, discovers him and the news achieves Billy's family, the civilised world comes after him. In the confusion that follows, Billy is shot dead by the police. Romi's closing reflection makes plain and clear that society can find no place for such a man except in demise.

Read together, the two novels show contrasting responses to the equivalent inner segment. Sindi's fragmentation takes the form of withdrawal. Having never belonged anywhere, he protects his fragile self by refusing to belong to any person. His detachment is a defence, and its failure exposes the emptiness at its centre. Billy's fragmentation takes the opposite form. He belongs too fully to an elite world that has no room for his deepest impulses, and he suppresses those impulses until they overwhelm him.

The resolutions differ therefore. Sindi moves toward integration by accepting duty within society. He does not discover a hidden rudimentary self; instead he discovers that the self is made through action and relationship. Billy moves toward wholeness by rejecting society completely. His fulfilment among the tribals

is genuine, but it depends on a complete break that civilisation will not allow. Joshi does not offer a simple and straightforward judgment on either path. Sindi's reintegration is tentative and partial, while Billy's flight is presented with sympathy and even awe, yet it ends in his violent demise.

What unites the two men is the source of their suffering. Both are extremely educated products of a modern, Westernised Indian elite, and both find that education and privilege give them no answer to the question of who they are. Their alienation is a mental and spiritual state alternatively than a social or financial one. In this sense Joshi's protagonists foresee a primary concern of later Indian English fiction: the cost of modernity for the inner life of those who appear to have benefited most from it.

Arun Joshi's first two novels portray the fragmented self with rare mind-related depth. Sindi Oberoi and Billy Biswas are men divided between an outer identity shaped by education, class and convention and an inner self that can not find expression. Sindi's foreignness lies within him; Billy's rudimentary self lies buried beneath the polished surface of Delhi society. Their stories trace alienation from society, from others and ultimately from the self, and they test two practicable ways out: integration through dependable action and liberation through flight.

Joshi's achievement lies in refusing to simplify either path. He shows that detachment can be a mask for fear and that the search for a genuine self can lead outside the limits of society wholly. By bringing together existential anxiety, the psychology of the divided self and Indian ideas of right action, he produced a typical fiction of inner crisis. The Foreigner and The Strange Case of Billy Biswas continue among the most searching studies in Indian English literature of what it means to be a stranger to oneself.

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