



International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories

International Peer Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LITERARY THEORIES (IJELLT)

ISSN: 3107-6505

Vol.:2: Issue: 1 2026.

(International Peer Reviewed and refereed English Journal)

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From Detachment to Self-Realisation in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*

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Abstract: This paper examines the disintegration of the human self and the existential predicament of the individual in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* (1968). A significant voice in Indian English fiction, Joshi engages with the psychological dimension of modern existence and its search for meaning. *The Foreigner*, his debut novel, centres on Sindi Oberoi, a culturally displaced individual born in Africa to an Indian father and an English mother, brought up by his Indian uncle, educated in England and America, and eventually settled in India. Despite his movement across diverse geographical, cultural, and social spaces, Sindi remains a "foreigner" wherever he goes, revealing that his alienation is rooted less in geography than in his fractured sense of self. This paper argues that Sindi's existential predicament is further intensified by his misconstrued philosophy of detachment, through which he attempts to evade emotional attachment, commitment, and responsibility. His relationship with June Blyth exposes the inherent contradiction between his desire for love and his fear of involvement, while the tragic deaths of June and Babu Rao Khemka compel him to confront the ethical consequences of his non-involvement. The paper further explores Sindi's gradual movement from isolation and self-absorption towards responsibility, self-knowledge, and meaningful human involvement. Sindi's journey from a psychologically alienated "nowhere man" to an individual capable of meaningful participation thus demonstrates that authentic existence cannot be achieved through escape from human relationships but through responsible engagement with them.

Keywords: Alienation, Identity, Detachment, Geography.



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Arun Joshi (1939–1993) occupies an important position in Indian English fiction. Born in India and educated both in India and the United States, Joshi initially pursued a career in industry before devoting himself to creative writing. His major novels, including *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, *The Apprentice*, and *The Last Labyrinth*, reflect his deep interest in the psychological and philosophical dimensions of human existence. *The Last Labyrinth* was recognised with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983. Characterised by introspection and philosophical inquiry, Joshi's fiction explores the inner conflicts of individuals struggling to locate meaning and belonging in a complex modern world. Rather than concentrating exclusively on the external structures of society, Joshi turns inward, examining characters who experience an intense conflict between the demands of worldly existence and their desire for a meaningful life. His first novel, *The Foreigner*, published in 1968, establishes many of the concerns that subsequently become characteristic of his fiction. *The Foreigner*, published in 1968, is particularly significant in this regard because it places alienation at the centre of its protagonist's realization. The novel follows Surrender Oberoi, known throughout the narrative as Sindi, whose life is marked by displacement from childhood. He is born in Nairobi to an Indian father and an English mother and, after the loss of his parents, is brought up by his Indian uncle. His mixed cultural inheritance, combined with the absence of a stable parental home, contributes to the insecurity that later becomes central to his personality. As an adult, Sindi travels from Kenya to London, Scotland, Boston, and finally New Delhi. He studies, works at different occupations, encounters different cultures, and develops several relationships, yet none of these experiences gives him the stable identity that he seeks. O. P. Bhatnagar observes that "a certain awareness of man's rootlessness and consequential loneliness and anxiety is the keynote of Arun Joshi's unique vision of contemporary Indo-English fiction." (49) The significance of this journey lies in the distinction between physical displacement and psychological alienation. Sindi is not simply an expatriate who has difficulty adjusting to a foreign society. His foreignness travels with him. Even when he returns to India, he initially continues to feel like an outsider. He himself expresses this condition when he asks:

In what way, if any, did I belong to the world that roared beneath my apartment window? Somebody had begotten me without a purpose, and so far I had lived without a purpose. Perhaps I felt like that because I was foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if I had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter! It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner. (Joshi 61)

This shows the central paradox of the novel. Sindi initially appears to be searching for a geographical home, but his own reflection reveals that no geographical location can resolve his problem. If America makes him a foreigner, Kenya or India would make little difference. His foreignness is internalised. The question “In what way, if any, did I belong” is therefore more than an expression of loneliness; it is a question about his relationship with existence itself. The problem is not merely where he belongs but whether he can experience himself as belonging anywhere at all. This condition is intensified by his persistent desire to discover the meaning of life and to do something significant. Sindi possesses intelligence, education, opportunities, but none of these automatically provides direction. His repeated movement from one occupation and place to another consequently becomes a form of experimentation through which he attempts to understand himself. Yet the more he searches externally, the more clearly the novel reveals that the crisis is located within him.

The psychological dimension of Sindi’s alienation is also evident in his relationships. June Blyth, an American woman with whom Sindi develops a deep and troubled romantic relationship, is particularly important because she recognises the emotional distance that Sindi himself cannot fully acknowledge. During their first encounter, June tells him: “There is something strange about you, you know. Something distant. I’d guess that when people are with you they don’t feel like they’re with a human being. Maybe it’s an Indian characteristic, but I have a feeling you’d be a foreigner everywhere.” (Joshi 33) June’s observation is crucial because it confirms that Sindi’s foreignness is not simply imposed upon him by society. Other people experience his emotional distance. He is physically present but psychologically withdrawn. His isolation therefore becomes partly self-created. Sindi’s childhood losses help explain why he develops such a strong resistance to attachment. The absence of his parents and the later death of his uncle deprive him of the emotional security that might have allowed him to form stable relationships. His few remaining possessions, including old photographs, become reminders of a past that cannot be recovered. Instead of accepting vulnerability as an unavoidable part of human relationships, Sindi attempts to protect himself by constructing a philosophy of detachment. Sartre’s existential philosophy provides a useful framework for understanding Sindi’s detachment as a form of self-alienation. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre observes that the human being “can take negative attitudes with respect to himself.” (86) Sindi’s persistent refusal to commit himself emotionally similarly reflects a negative relationship with his own existence, as he distances himself from relationships, responsibilities, and the possibility of belonging.

Detachment initially appears to Sindi as freedom. He believes that attachment produces dependence, possession, vulnerability, and suffering. If he remains emotionally uninvolved, he imagines that he can maintain control over his own existence. His position becomes particularly clear when he reflects upon marriage: "Marriage was more often a lust for possession than anything else. People got married just as they bought new cars." (Joshi 67) Sindi's criticism of marriage is not entirely without justification. He recognises the possessive tendencies that can enter intimate relationships. The problem, however, is that he extends this suspicion to attachment itself. For him, freedom begins to mean freedom from emotional claims. He consequently attempts to maintain relationships without accepting the responsibilities that accompany them. Existentialist thought places considerable emphasis on freedom and individual choice, but freedom cannot be separated from responsibility. Sindi understands the first concept while resisting the second. His attempt to avoid commitment is itself a choice, and his later suffering demonstrates that choices have consequences. His movement through different countries and relationships can therefore be interpreted as a search for a meaning that he hopes to find outside himself. The difficulty is that he continually attempts to escape the conditions of existence rather than confront them.

The relationship with June brings this contradiction into sharper focus. June is not merely a romantic figure in the narrative; she becomes the person through whom Sindi's philosophy is tested. She wants emotional belonging and eventually marriage, whereas Sindi believes that marriage would compromise freedom. Their relationship therefore places his abstract philosophy against the concrete demands of human affection. Although Sindi attempts to remain detached, his behaviour demonstrates that he is not emotionally indifferent to June. He loves her, desires her, and fears losing her, yet he refuses to acknowledge the responsibilities that follow from that emotional involvement. June eventually recognises the emotional consequences of Sindi's philosophy of detachment. His insistence on self-sufficiency and his reluctance to accept emotional commitment create a distance between them, leaving June feeling excluded from his life despite their deep relationship. He spends his life asking where he belongs, but when June offers him the possibility of belonging through a relationship, he refuses it. His alienation is therefore reinforced by his own unwillingness to accept intimacy. He wants freedom from loneliness without accepting the vulnerability required to overcome loneliness. Sindi's detachment can also be read through Sartre's conception of consciousness as being aware of its own "nothingness" (86). His emotional distance is therefore not merely an absence of attachment but an existential condition arising from his inability to find a stable sense of self and belonging.

The entry of Sindi's Friend, Babu Rao Khemka into the narrative complicates the relationship between Sindi, June, and detachment. Babu is an Indian student whom Sindi meets during his years in Boston, where he is pursuing a Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering. His friendship with Sindi later becomes central to the novel's exploration of jealousy and responsibility. Their relationship eventually becomes closely connected with June. Babu is significant because his presence transforms Sindi's private philosophy into a matter involving other people's lives. What had previously been an argument about personal freedom now produces consequences that Sindi can no longer contain within his own consciousness. June eventually becomes involved with Babu and marries him. However, the unresolved connection between June and Sindi continues to affect the relationship. Babu's growing insecurity is intensified by his awareness of June's continuing emotional attachment to Sindi. His jealousy, rejection, and fragile sense of identity gradually undermine his emotional stability. Unable to cope with these conflicting feelings, he ultimately takes his own life. Babu's suicide becomes a crucial turning point in the novel, forcing Sindi to confront the consequences of his philosophy of detachment and his refusal to accept emotional responsibility. The tragedy forces Sindi to confront the limitations of his belief that he can remain detached from the consequences of human relationships. It is important, however, to formulate Sindi's responsibility carefully. He is not literally the murderer of Babu and June. His guilt is moral and psychological rather than equivalent to direct physical causation. The tragedy makes him recognise that refusing involvement does not make a person ethically neutral. His earlier belief that he could avoid suffering by standing outside relationships is destroyed by the consequences of his choices. After Babu's death, Sindi's internal crisis reaches a new intensity. He observes: "It suddenly struck me that something had been knocked out of me. I was just not the same person anymore.... I felt as if there was nothing left that I could depend upon....I felt like a desert or like a vast field of naked oaks in winter time. I felt more alone and naked in the world than I had ever felt before." (Joshi 174–175)

The imagery of being "alone and naked" is significant because Sindi's earlier philosophy has functioned almost like psychological armour. Detachment has protected him from acknowledging his dependence upon others, but it has also prevented him from forming meaningful relationships. Sindi's search for identity can be understood through Sartre's observation that "Being is that and outside of that, nothing" (36). By refusing deep emotional, social, and cultural attachments, Sindi attempts to preserve his independence; however, this detachment leaves him caught between the desire for belonging and the fear of commitment. Once the consequences of his choices become unavoidable, the protective structure collapses.

He is left with himself, but this time without the confidence that his philosophy has provided him with an adequate way of living. June's subsequent pregnancy makes the issue of responsibility still more immediate. After Babu's death, she turns to Sindi, but his refusal to accept responsibility contributes to her decision to undergo an abortion, during which she dies. The original material emphasises that Sindi experiences the deaths of Babu and June as a consequence of his false philosophy of detachment. The more productive critical formulation, however, is that the tragedy reveals the ethical inadequacy of his withdrawal. Sindi's retrospective understanding makes clear that his alienation is not simply a consequence of geographical displacement. His travels have taught him to distance himself from the external world, yet he remains unable to detach himself from his own troubled consciousness. He articulates, "I had moved whichever way I felt led. I had learnt much on the way. I had learnt to be detached from the world, but not from myself." (Joshi 196) Following the deaths of Babu and June, Sindi can no longer sustain the illusion that detachment protects him from the consequences of human relationships. He retrospectively recognises the destructive consequences of his earlier choices and begins to confront the guilt that accompanies them.

This recognition changes the meaning of guilt in the novel. Guilt is initially destructive because it produces self-condemnation and isolation, but it eventually becomes productive because it forces Sindi to examine his earlier assumptions. Sindi begins to understand that his problem was not that he had cared too much but that he had misunderstood detachment. His earlier version of detachment was actually a form of escape. His return to India therefore assumes symbolic importance. India does not immediately cure Sindi of his alienation, and the novel should not be reduced to a simplistic opposition between a spiritually meaningful East and an alienating West. Sindi has been a foreigner in several countries, and his return to India matters because it coincides with a change in his consciousness. His eventual sense of belonging is achieved not simply because India is his ancestral home but because he gradually becomes capable of belonging.

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Mr. Khemka, Babu's father, is an important figure in the Indian section of *The Foreigner*. He is a Delhi-based industrialist and becomes connected with Sindi when Sindi returns to India after Babu's death. Sindi is employed by Mr. Khemka, which brings him directly into the family and into the unresolved circumstances surrounding Babu's death. During his stay in Delhi, Sindi encounters Sheila, Babu's sister, who repeatedly questions him about the events that led to her brother's death.

Sindi attempts to avoid these questions because they force him to confront a past from which he has been trying to distance himself. His inability to escape Babu's memory demonstrates that his philosophy of detachment cannot completely protect him from emotional responsibility. The bronze figure of the dancing Shiva at Khemka's house further provides a symbolic representation of this change. The image combines apparently opposite forces of destruction and creation. Sindi's own development follows a similar pattern: the old self, based upon fear, withdrawal, and self-protection, must undergo a kind of symbolic death before a more mature self can emerge. The Shiva image can therefore be read not merely as an Indian cultural symbol but as a representation of Sindi's psychological transformation. His transformation is ethical rather than merely emotional. He begins to understand that freedom requires action and responsibility rather than withdrawal.

The later phase of Sindi's life introduces to a low paid employee, Muthu at Khemka's office, whose presence becomes part of his movement towards ordinary human involvement. Muthu is significant within the Indian phase of the narrative because Sindi's interaction with him contributes to the shift from an existence dominated by self-analysis towards one involving work, responsibility, and other people. In this respect, Sindi's transformation moves closer to the principle of Karma Yoga, in which action and detachment are not opposites but complementary aspects of ethical living. His transformation begins to occur through ordinary participation rather than through philosophical speculation alone. This development also brings the novel into conversation with the Indian philosophical idea of action without possessive attachment. Sindi's earlier detachment resembles refusal: he avoids involvement because he fears its consequences. His mature detachment, by contrast, allows him to act without attempting to possess the results of his actions. The distinction is crucial. The novel does not ultimately argue that human beings should become completely detached from one another. Instead, it suggests that meaningful participation requires freedom from possessiveness and egoism. Sindi's alienation is thus sustained by his own conception of freedom.

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The final phase of the novel demonstrates the consequences of this change. Sheila appears in the closing movement of Sindi's story, and his interaction with her is deliberately ordinary. It is Sheila, Babu Khemka's sister who gives him a sense of commitment and stability in life. When she is preparing to leave his office, he asks: "If you can wait ten minutes, I will come with you... Maybe we could have tea." (Joshi 229) The importance of this statement lies precisely in its simplicity. Sindi does not make a dramatic declaration of love, nor does he suddenly announce that he has discovered the complete meaning of existence.

Instead, he makes an ordinary invitation to another person. For a man whose life has been defined by emotional distance, this willingness to remain in the company of another person represents a significant psychological change. Sheila's importance, therefore, lies less in the possibility of a new romantic relationship than in what the encounter demonstrates about Sindi's changed attitude towards involvement. He is no longer automatically interpreting another person's presence as a threat to his autonomy. The invitation indicates his willingness to participate in an ordinary human exchange. The original source material similarly interprets this final gesture as evidence of Sindi's renewed human involvement and his movement beyond the earlier identity conflict.

The ending should not be interpreted as a claim that Sindi has achieved complete happiness or that all his existential questions have disappeared. His past cannot be erased, and the deaths of June and Babu remain part of his consciousness. What changes is his response to life. Earlier he tried to solve suffering through withdrawal; now he is willing to participate despite the possibility of suffering. The final invitation therefore represents a new mode of existence rather than a final philosophical answer. The movement from the isolated "I" towards the possibility of "we" provides a useful way of understanding the novel as a whole. At the beginning, Sindi's consciousness is dominated by questions concerning his own identity, freedom, and meaning. His relationships are filtered through the fear that involvement will deprive him of independence. By the end, he is able to approach another person without immediately withdrawing. His participation in an ordinary social interaction indicates that he has begun to understand belonging as something created through involvement rather than something guaranteed by nationality or geography. The final episode with Sheila is therefore not an incidental detail but a carefully constructed indication of the change in his personality.

The title *The Foreigner* consequently acquires a deeper significance. Sindi is certainly a foreigner in the literal sense at different points in his life, but the novel ultimately locates foreignness within the self. Once he begins to accept relationships, responsibility, and involvement, the condition that has defined him begins to weaken. His return to India becomes meaningful because it accompanies this internal movement. He is no longer simply searching for a country in which he belongs; he is learning how to belong. This progression prevents the novel from being reduced either to a simple existential tragedy or to a conventional story of spiritual redemption. Its achievement lies in showing how an individual's mistaken understanding of freedom can itself become a source of alienation.

Sindi's journey demonstrates that withdrawal may protect the self temporarily, but it cannot provide meaning. Meaning becomes possible when freedom is combined with responsibility and when detachment is understood not as escape from others but as freedom from possessiveness. Sindi's final movement towards involvement does not erase his past, but it gives that past a new significance. The "foreigner" who once believed that he belonged nowhere begins to discover that belonging is not simply a matter of birthplace, nationality, or cultural identity. It is a condition created through participation, responsibility, and openness to others. In this sense, *The Foreigner* transforms the existential problem of alienation into a tentative affirmation of human involvement.

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