



GENDER DYNAMICS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN ARUN JOSHI'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Arun Joshi's novels delve deeply into the complexities of gender dynamics, presenting a nuanced exploration of female autonomy and agency within traditional and non-traditional roles. Through characters such as Bilasia in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, June Blyth in *The Foreigner*, Veena and Leela in *The Apprentice*, and Anuradha in *The Last Labyrinth*, Joshi highlights the profound impact of women on the protagonists' journeys of self-discovery and moral evolution. These characters challenge societal norms and offer alternative paradigms of womanhood, influencing the male protagonists and driving the narrative forward. Joshi's portrayal of these women underscores the fluid and context-dependent nature of power and gender, inviting readers to reflect on their societal and personal values. His work provides a rich tapestry of human relationships and the universal quest for identity and meaning, significantly contributing to Indian English literature.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, gender dynamics, female autonomy, female agency, traditional gender roles, non-traditional gender roles, self-discovery, Indian English literature, character analysis, societal norms.

1. INTRODUCTION

Arun Joshi was a prominent Indian author and novelist known for his profound exploration of human psychology and existential themes. Born in 1939, Joshi pursued his education in India and later in the United States, where he studied industrial management at MIT. This diverse educational background influenced his literary works, which often delve into the complexities of modern life and the human condition. Joshi's literary career is marked by deep introspection and a unique narrative style that blends psychological realism with existential questions. His debut novel, *The Foreigner* (1968), introduced readers to his characteristic exploration of alienation and identity crisis through the protagonist, Sindi Oberoi. This novel set the tone for Joshi's future works, where characters often grapple with inner conflicts and societal expectations.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1971) is perhaps Joshi's most celebrated work, highlighting the protagonist's journey from a superficial, materialistic existence towards a more authentic, tribal life. This novel is a poignant commentary on seeking self-identity and rejecting societal norms. Joshi continued to explore these themes in *The Apprentice* (1974), where the protagonist, Ratan Rathor, deals with moral dilemmas and the consequences of corruption, ultimately seeking redemption.

In *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), Joshi delves into the spiritual void and existential angst of Som Bhaskar, a successful businessperson who embarks on a quest for deeper meaning. This novel won the Sahitya Akademi Award, cementing Joshi's place in Indian literature. His final novel, *The City and the River* (1990), is an allegorical tale reflecting the socio-political landscape of India, showcasing his versatility and depth as a writer. Throughout his career, Arun Joshi's works have been acclaimed for their psychological depth, existential themes, and exploration of the human psyche. His novels remain significant in Indian English literature, offering profound insights into the complexities of life and the perennial quest for self-understanding. Gender studies play a crucial role in literary analysis by providing insights into how literature reflects, reinforces, or challenges societal norms related to gender. By examining how characters are portrayed and how gender dynamics operate within a text, gender studies allow a deeper understanding of the cultural and social contexts shaping literature. This field of study highlights the power structures, biases, and inequalities that influence the creation and interpretation of literary works.

According to Toril Moi, "Gender theory enables us to ask new questions about familiar texts, illuminating previously overlooked aspects of character and narrative" (Moi 204). This approach helps to uncover the underlying assumptions about gender roles and relationships that may not be immediately apparent. By analyzing gender dynamics, scholars can reveal how literature reflects and shapes societal attitudes towards gender.

Judith Butler emphasizes that "gender is not something one is, but something one does – an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun" (Butler 25). This perspective allows literary analysts to explore how characters perform gender roles and how these performances are received by other characters and by readers. It also opens up discussions about the fluidity of gender and how literature can challenge rigid gender binaries.

In the context of literary studies, Elaine Showalter argues that "feminist criticism aims to understand women's literary history and to uncover the female tradition in literature" (Showalter 5). This involves bringing attention to works by female authors and analyzing how women are represented in literature written by both

men and women. By doing so, gender studies can provide a more inclusive and comprehensive view of literary history.

The significance of gender studies in literary analysis is further underscored by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who contend that "literary texts are embedded in social contexts that produce them and that they in turn help to shape" (Gilbert and Gubar 34). This cyclical relationship means understanding gender dynamics within the literature, which is essential for understanding broader societal changes and continuities. Gender studies thus offer a vital lens through which to interpret literature, providing insights into both the text itself and the cultural environment from which it emerges.

Arun Joshi's portrayal of gender dynamics and female characters in his novels is marked by a nuanced and insightful examination of their roles and relationships within the societal framework. In his works, female characters often embody traditional and non-traditional roles, reflecting the complexities and contradictions of their social environments. For instance, in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Bilasia represents a primal, almost mythical femininity that starkly contrasts the conventional, urban women in Billy's life, highlighting the protagonist's internal conflict and societal rebellion. Similarly, in *The Foreigner*, June Blyth's relationship with Sindi Oberoi underscores the cultural and emotional chasms that influence their interactions, portraying her as a figure of emotional support and a symbol of the cultural dislocation that Sindi experiences. Joshi's female characters are not merely passive figures but are often pivotal in driving the narrative forward, influencing the male protagonists' journeys of self-discovery and existential quests. Through these portrayals, Joshi addresses the broader themes of identity, alienation, and societal expectations, offering a critical lens on the gender dynamics that shape human experiences.

2. KEY FEMALE CHARACTERS IN JOSHI'S NOVELS

Bilasia, a central character in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, represents a profound departure from the conventional female roles depicted in much of Indian literature. Her character embodies a primal, almost elemental force that starkly contrasts with the urban, sophisticated women in Billy's previous life. Bilasia is depicted as a tribal woman deeply connected to the natural world, symbolizing an unrestrained and authentic way of life that profoundly impacts Billy's journey of self-discovery.

Bilasia's role in the narrative is crucial as she represents the spiritual and existential alternative that Billy seeks. Her relationship with Billy is marked by a raw, unmediated connection that is devoid of the pretensions and materialism of the urban world. As Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, "Bilasia's character challenges the traditional boundaries of female representation, offering a complex figure who is both nurturing and fiercely independent" (Mukherjee 65). This complexity allows Bilasia to catalyze Billy's transformation, drawing

him away from his disenchanting life and into a realm where he feels a profound sense of belonging and purpose.

Bilasia's influence on Billy is profound, as seen when Billy reflects on his life with her: "In Bilasia, I found an elemental connection that I had never experienced before. She was the earth, the trees, the very air I breathed" (Joshi 103). This connection underscores the thematic exploration of authenticity versus societal constructs, a recurring motif in Joshi's works. Bilasia's character thus embodies the antithesis of Billy's disillusionment towards his own life, offering him a path to spiritual and existential fulfilment.

The significance of Bilasia in the narrative extends beyond her relationship with Billy. As R.S. Pathak suggests, "Bilasia represents the untamed, the uncolonized aspect of Indian culture that stands in stark contrast to the Westernized, urban elite" (Pathak 117). This dichotomy highlights Joshi's critique of modernity and his exploration of more profound, intrinsic values rooted in indigenous traditions and natural living.

In conclusion, Bilasia's character in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is integral to the narrative, serving as both a foil to the protagonist's former life and as a symbol of the authentic existence he seeks. Through her portrayal, Arun Joshi delves into themes of identity, cultural dislocation, and the quest for meaning, using Bilasia's primal strength and connection to the natural world to challenge and ultimately transform Billy's understanding of himself and his place in the world.

June Blyth, a significant character in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*, plays a pivotal role in the protagonist Sindi Oberoi's journey of self-discovery. As an American woman entangled in a complex relationship with Sindi, June represents a cultural bridge and a source of emotional turbulence for him. Her character and their relationship highlight the themes of alienation, identity, and the search for belonging that are central to the novel.

June's relationship with Sindi is characterized by deep emotional connection and significant cultural differences. As Sudhir K. Arora notes, "June Blyth embodies the conflicting emotions and cultural dislocations that Sindi experiences, making her a crucial element in his existential quest" (Arora 49). June's presence in Sindi's life forces him to confront his feelings of dislocation and his struggle to reconcile his Indian heritage with his Western education and experiences.

June's role in the narrative is multifaceted. On one hand, she provides Sindi with a sense of companionship and intimacy that he desperately seeks. On the other hand, her cultural background and perspectives often clash with Sindi's own, leading to moments of profound introspection and conflict. In one poignant moment,

Sindi reflects, "With June, I felt a connection that transcended the physical, yet our differences were a constant reminder of the chasm between my world and hers" (Joshi 87). This dynamic illustrates the broader themes of cultural alienation and the search for identity.

June's impact on Sindi is transformative, pushing him towards a deeper understanding of himself and his place in the world. As Tapan Kumar Ghosh observes, "June's influence on Sindi is both a catalyst for his self-discovery and a mirror reflecting his internal struggles" (Ghosh 72). Through their interactions, Sindi is compelled to examine his beliefs, values, and the roots of his existential angst. This process of self-examination is crucial to his development as a character and his eventual journey towards self-acceptance.

Furthermore, June's character challenges traditional gender roles and expectations within the narrative. Her independence, assertiveness, and emotional complexity contrast with the more conventional representations of women in Sindi's life, offering a fresh perspective on gender dynamics. Indira Bhatt remarks, "June Blyth stands out as a strong, independent figure whose relationship with Sindi defies conventional norms and highlights the evolving dynamics of gender and cultural interaction" (Bhatt 53).

In conclusion, June Blyth's character in *The Foreigner* is integral to Sindi Oberoi's journey of self-discovery. Her relationship with Sindi serves as a source of emotional connection and cultural conflict, driving the protagonist to confront his identity and existential dilemmas. Through June, Arun Joshi explores themes of alienation, cultural dislocation, and the complexities of gender dynamics, making her a vital and transformative presence in the narrative.

In Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice*, Ratan Rathor's relationships with female characters significantly affect his moral and psychological development. These relationships are central to the narrative and reflect broader themes of guilt, redemption, and the search for identity.

Ratan's relationship with his mother is foundational, influencing his early moral compass and sense of duty. Her teachings and expectations instil in him a strong sense of responsibility and integrity. However, as Ratan reflects on his life, he often grapples with the guilt of deviating from these values. As Indira Bhatt notes, "Ratan's mother's influence is a constant reminder of his lost innocence and the moral decline he seeks to atone for" (Bhatt 67). This relationship highlights the theme of redemption, as Ratan's quest for forgiveness is deeply rooted in his desire to honour his mother's values.

Another significant female character in Ratan's life is Veena, his colleague and later his romantic interest. Veena represents a sense of normalcy and potential redemption for Ratan. Her presence in his life allows him to reconnect with his lost values and seek redemption. As Ratan observes, "With Veena, I saw a glimpse

of the life I could have had, a life of honesty and integrity" (Joshi 102). This relationship underscores the theme of redemption, as Ratan's interactions with Veena inspire him to strive for a better, more honest life.

Ratan's relationship with Leela, a symbol of his moral degradation, contrasts sharply with his relationship with Veena. Leela embodies the corruption and ethical compromises that Ratan has succumbed to. As R.S. Pathak explains, "Leela's character serves as a mirror to Ratan's moral failures, highlighting his descent into corruption and his struggle to reclaim his lost integrity" (Pathak 81). This relationship is significant as it forces Ratan to confront the darker aspects of his personality and the consequences of his actions.

The interactions with these female characters collectively influence Ratan's journey towards self-awareness and redemption. Each relationship serves as a reflection of his internal struggles and the values he grapples with. Tapan Kumar Ghosh remarks, "Ratan's relationships with female characters in *The Apprentice* are not mere plot devices but essential elements that drive his psychological and moral evolution" (Ghosh 94). Through these relationships, Joshi explores the complexities of human nature and the possibility of redemption.

In conclusion, Ratan's relationships with female characters in *The Apprentice* are crucial to his development and the novel's thematic depth. These relationships highlight the influence of familial values, the possibility of redemption through love and integrity, and the stark contrast between moral integrity and corruption. Joshi uses these relationships to delve into the complexities of Ratan's character, making them integral to the narrative and its exploration of redemption and self-discovery.

In Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*, the character of Anuradha and the portrayal of other women play crucial roles in the protagonist Som Bhaskar's journey of self-discovery and existential exploration. Anuradha, in particular, is a complex and enigmatic figure who significantly influences Som's quest for meaning.

Anuradha represents both a spiritual guide and a romantic enigma, embodying the labyrinthine nature of Som's existential quest. Her character is marked by a mysterious allure that draws Som deeper into his introspective journey. As Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, "Anuradha's character is pivotal in the novel, symbolizing the deeper, often inscrutable aspects of the human psyche that Som is desperate to understand" (Mukherjee 77). Through her interactions with Som, Anuradha challenges his perceptions and pushes him to confront his inner void.

Anuradha's influence on Som is profound, as evidenced by his reflections on their relationship. Som remarks, "With Anuradha, I felt a connection that transcended the physical. She was the key to the labyrinth that I sought to navigate" (Joshi 145). This connection highlights Anuradha's role as a muse and a catalyst

for Som's existential introspection. Her presence in his life forces him to grapple with the more profound questions of existence, love, and fulfilment.

Other female characters in *The Last Labyrinth* also contribute to the thematic depth of the novel. Geeta, Som's wife, represents the conventional and materialistic aspects of his life that he finds increasingly unsatisfactory. Her character serves as a foil to Anuradha's spiritual and enigmatic nature. According to R.S. Pathak, "Geeta's character underscores the conflict between Som's material success and his spiritual emptiness, highlighting the duality of his existence" (Pathak 102). This duality is central to Som's internal struggle and search for a more meaningful life.

In addition to Anuradha and Geeta, other female figures in the novel embody various facets of femininity and influence Som's journey. These characters collectively reflect the novel's exploration of love, desire, and the search for deeper truths. As Tapan Kumar Ghosh observes, "The women in *The Last Labyrinth* are not merely peripheral figures but are integral to the protagonist's journey, each representing different aspects of his quest for meaning" (Ghosh 110). Through these characters, Joshi delves into the complexities of human relationships and the multifaceted nature of the human soul.

In conclusion, Anuradha and the other women in *The Last Labyrinth* play crucial roles in shaping Som Bhaskar's existential journey. With her spiritual and enigmatic presence, Anuradha serves as a critical figure in Som's search for deeper meaning. At the same time, other female characters, such as Geeta, highlight the duality and conflicts within his life. Joshi's nuanced portrayal of these women enriches the novel's exploration of existential themes and adds depth to the protagonist's quest for self-understanding.

3. THEMES OF GENDER AND POWER

Arun Joshi's novels often depict complex power relations between genders, exploring how these dynamics influence characters' interactions and personal journeys. Through his nuanced portrayal of male and female characters, Joshi examines the subtle and overt ways power is negotiated and exercised within relationships, highlighting societal norms and individual struggles for autonomy.

In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, the power dynamics between Billy and the women in his life illustrate significant themes of control and liberation. Billy's relationships with his wife, Meena, and his tribal lover, Bilasia, contrast, revealing different aspects of power. Meena represents societal expectations and conformity, often exerting subtle pressure on Billy to adhere to social norms. As Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, "Meena's character embodies the societal power that seeks to constrain Billy, reflecting the broader theme of societal control versus personal freedom" (Mukherjee 82). Conversely, Bilasia's relationship with Billy is

marked by a raw, elemental connection that subverts traditional power dynamics. Billy finds in Bilasia a sense of liberation and equality that he lacks in his marriage, illustrating Joshi's exploration of power as fluid and context-dependent.

In *The Foreigner*, the relationship between Sindi Oberoi and June Blyth showcases power relations marked by cultural and emotional complexities. June's independence and assertiveness challenge Sindi's perceptions and force him to reevaluate his identity and cultural assumptions. As Tapan Kumar Ghosh observes, "June's character disrupts the traditional power balance, positioning herself as both a source of emotional support and a catalyst for Sindi's self-reflection" (Ghosh 97). This dynamic reflects Joshi's interest in how cross-cultural interactions can reshape power relations, leading to deeper mutual understanding and personal growth.

The Apprentice provides a stark portrayal of gendered power dynamics through the protagonist Ratan Rathor's interactions with female characters such as Leela and Veena. Leela symbolizes the corrupting influence of power, as Ratan's moral descent is mirrored in his exploitative relationship with her. Ratan's abuse of power in his relationship with Leela reflects his broader ethical decline. As Indira Bhatt points out, "Ratan's relationship with Leela serves as a metaphor for his moral corruption, illustrating how power can be misused in personal relationships" (Bhatt 112). In contrast, Veena represents a potential for redemption and moral integrity, challenging Ratan to reclaim his lost values and integrity.

In *The Last Labyrinth*, the power dynamics between Som Bhaskar and the women in his life, particularly Anuradha, are central to the novel's exploration of existential themes. Anuradha's enigmatic presence and spiritual depth profoundly influence Som, shifting the power dynamics in their relationship. As R.S. Pathak notes, "Anuradha's character embodies a spiritual power that transcends traditional gender roles, offering Som a path to self-discovery and existential fulfilment" (Pathak 120). This dynamic underscores Joshi's portrayal of power as multifaceted and transformative, capable of leading to profound personal change.

In conclusion, Arun Joshi's depiction of power relations between genders is marked by complexity and nuance. Through characters like Meena, Bilasia, June, Leela, and Anuradha, Joshi explores how power is negotiated and exercised within relationships, reflecting broader societal norms and personal struggles for autonomy. His novels reveal power's fluid and context-dependent nature, highlighting its potential for both constraint and liberation.

Arun Joshi's novels present a rich tapestry of traditional and non-traditional gender roles, examining how they influence characters' lives and personal journeys. By juxtaposing conventional expectations with more

progressive representations, Joshi delves into the complexities of gender dynamics within India's societal and cultural contexts.

In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, traditional gender roles are embodied by characters such as Meena, Billy's wife. Meena's character adheres to societal expectations of a dutiful wife, prioritizing domestic responsibilities and social status. However, this conventional role contrasts Bilasia, a tribal woman who embodies non-traditional gender roles through her independence and primal connection to nature. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, "Bilasia represents an alternative to the domesticated, socially conforming female, highlighting the dichotomy between societal expectations and individual authenticity" (Mukherjee 85). This contrast underscores the tension between societal norms and personal freedom, a recurring theme in Joshi's works.

In *The Foreigner*, Joshi explores non-traditional gender roles through June Blyth, an independent and assertive American woman. June's character challenges Sindi Oberoi's preconceived notions of femininity and relationships. Her independence and emotional forthrightness represent a departure from traditional Indian gender roles, which often emphasize submissiveness and domesticity in women. Tapan Kumar Ghosh states, "June's character disrupts traditional gender norms, offering a new paradigm of womanhood that is both assertive and emotionally open" (Ghosh 99). This portrayal reflects the cultural exchange and evolving gender dynamics that Sindi navigates throughout the novel.

The Apprentice features Veena and Leela, who embody contrasting gender roles. Veena represents the traditional role of a supportive and morally upright woman, guiding Ratan Rathor towards redemption and ethical living. In contrast, Leela epitomizes the non-traditional role of a woman entangled in corruption and moral ambiguity. Indira Bhatt notes, "Veena and Leela represent the binary opposites of traditional virtue and modern moral complexity, respectively, challenging Ratan to navigate these divergent influences" (Bhatt 118). These characters highlight the spectrum of female roles and their impact on Ratan's moral journey.

In *The Last Labyrinth*, Anuradha's character embodies a non-traditional gender role through her spiritual depth and enigmatic presence. Unlike conventional female characters who may be confined to domestic spheres, Anuradha profoundly influences Som Bhaskar's existential quest. R.S. Pathak asserts, "Anuradha's non-traditional role as a spiritual guide and enigmatic figure challenges the protagonist's and readers' perceptions of gender roles and their significance in personal growth" (Pathak 124). Her character defies easy categorization, reflecting Joshi's nuanced approach to gender dynamics.

Joshi's exploration of gender roles in his novels challenges traditional expectations and opens up new possibilities for understanding the diverse expressions of femininity and masculinity. By portraying

characters who navigate and often subvert these roles, Joshi highlights the fluidity of gender and the importance of individual authenticity.

Arun Joshi's novels frequently explore the themes of autonomy and agency of female characters, providing a nuanced examination of their roles and influence within the narrative. Through his diverse portrayals of women, Joshi highlights their struggles for independence, complex identities, and impact on the male protagonists' journeys.

In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Bilasia exemplifies a character with significant autonomy and agency. Unlike the other women in Billy's life, Bilasia is not constrained by societal expectations and norms. Her connection to nature and her tribal roots afford her a sense of alluring and transformative freedom for Billy. Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, "Bilasia's character embodies a raw, unrestrained agency that challenges Billy's understanding of freedom and societal constraints" (Mukherjee 87). Bilasia's independence and rejection of conventional roles significantly influence Billy's journey towards self-discovery.

In *The Foreigner*, June Blyth's character is marked by a strong sense of autonomy and agency. As an American woman living abroad, June navigates cultural differences confidently and assertively. Her emotional forthrightness and independence characterize her relationship with Sindi Oberoi. Tapan Kumar Ghosh observes, "June's assertive personality and her ability to make autonomous choices disrupt traditional gender dynamics and compel Sindi to reevaluate his beliefs and cultural assumptions" (Ghosh 101). June's agency catalyzes Sindi's introspection and personal growth, highlighting her pivotal role in the narrative.

In *The Apprentice*, the contrasting characters of Veena and Leela offer insights into different aspects of female agency. Veena represents moral integrity and the possibility of redemption. Her influence on Ratan Rathor is significant, as she embodies the values and ethical standards that Ratan aspires to reclaim. Indira Bhatt notes, "Veena's character is a beacon of moral clarity and agency, guiding Ratan towards redemption through her unwavering principles" (Bhatt 120). On the other hand, Leela's character showcases a different kind of agency, one that is entangled with moral ambiguity and corruption. Her relationship with Ratan reflects the complexities of power and influence within personal relationships.

Anuradha in *The Last Labyrinth* epitomizes a unique spiritual and existential agency blend. Her enigmatic presence and profound spiritual connection challenge Som Bhaskar's perceptions and drive his quest for deeper meaning. R.S. Pathak asserts, "Anuradha's character, with her spiritual depth and independence, transcends traditional gender roles and exerts a profound influence on Som's existential journey" (Pathak 126). Anuradha's autonomy and her role as a spiritual guide underscore her significant agency in shaping the narrative.

Arun Joshi underscores the importance of female autonomy and agency through these portrayals in his novels. His female characters are not merely passive figures but are integral to the development of the male protagonists and the unfolding of the narrative. By highlighting their independence and influence, Joshi provides a rich and nuanced exploration of gender dynamics and the complexities of human relationships.

4. CONCLUSION

Arun Joshi's novels offer a profound exploration of gender dynamics, highlighting the autonomy and agency of female characters through intricate narratives that challenge traditional and non-traditional roles. Through characters like Bilasia in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, who embodies a raw, unrestrained agency, and June Blyth in *The Foreigner*, who disrupts conventional gender dynamics with her assertiveness and independence, Joshi portrays women as integral to the thematic depth and development of his stories. Similarly, in *The Apprentice*, the contrasting figures of Veena and Leela illustrate the spectrum of female agency, from moral integrity to moral ambiguity. At the same time, Anuradha in *The Last Labyrinth* represents spiritual depth and existential influence, transcending traditional gender roles. These portrayals are not mere plot devices but pivotal elements that drive the protagonists' journeys of self-discovery and personal growth. By depicting complex and autonomous female characters, Joshi invites readers to reflect on broader societal norms and individual values, making his exploration of gender dynamics both relevant and impactful. His nuanced approach underscores the fluidity and context-dependent nature of power and gender, revealing the multifaceted nature of human relationships and the universal quest for identity and meaning. This comprehensive examination of gender roles and agency in Joshi's works highlights his significant contribution to Indian English literature, providing a rich tapestry of characters and themes that continue to resonate with readers.

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