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Cultural Displacement and Espoused Philosophy in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*

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Abstract: *The present paper attempts to examine the interrelation between cultural displacement and espoused philosophy in Arun Joshi's The Foreigner. Joshi skillfully weaves Sindi Oberoi's profound sense of displacement with his evolving philosophy of detachment. He shows how his search for identity shifts from superficial non-involvement to a meaningful, existential commitment grounded in the Indian concept of karma yoga—selfless action—which he ultimately embodies by safeguarding the lives of the factory workers in Delhi. The novel traces Sindi's quest for meaning as he moves from Kenya to London, Boston, and finally Delhi; yet wherever he lives, he experiences himself as a foreigner—born in Kenya, studying in England and the United States, and settling in India. His emotionally detached relationships and experiences initially convince him that non-involvement ensures tranquility. Consequently, he chooses a rootless, and uninvolved existence; however, this pursuit leads him through a series of crises marked by the suicide of friend, Babu Khemka and tragic death of his beloved, June Blyth and his own deepening struggle with purposelessness and alienation. Ultimately confronted with a humanitarian crisis, he dismantles his self-protective philosophy, and exposes the limits of detachment as a defense mechanism. The study employs qualitative close textual analysis supplemented by relevant secondary sources. The findings reveal that even an individual like Sindi cannot remain detached indefinitely, regardless of his cultural dislocation or emotional uprootedness.*

Keywords: *Arun Joshi, espoused philosophy, cultural displacement, humanitarian landscape, breach of espoused philosophy.*

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Introduction

Cultural displacement refers to the loss of one's original cultural identity due to external pressures such as migration or colonization, often leading to alienation, dislocation, and a fragmented sense of self (Bhugra and Becker 18–24). An espoused philosophy denotes the values and principles that an individual or institution publicly declares, often through articulated statements. It represents the stated ideology, which may differ from the *theory-in-use*—the implicit principles that actually guide behaviour. Its meaning becomes authentic only when reflected in consistent action, although a gap between professed beliefs and practised behaviour is common (Argyris 7–8).

Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* captures these tensions through the character of Sindi Oberoi, whose journey across continents reflects a profound struggle with cultural rootlessness and a self-protective philosophy of non-involvement. By examining Sindi's internal conflicts and the gradual collapse of his professed detachment, the present paper explores how Joshi portrays cultural displacement as a catalyst for psychological, moral, and existential transformation.

Research Question

- How does Arun Joshi use the themes of cultural displacement and espoused philosophy in *The Foreigner* to trace Sindi Oberoi's journey from emotional detachment to existential responsibility?

Research Objectives

- To examine how cultural displacement shapes Sindi Oberoi's sense of identity, belonging, and emotional responses in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*.
- To analyze the gap between Sindi's espoused philosophy of detachment and his actual behaviour, and to evaluate how this gap evolves into a meaningful ethical commitment by the end of the novel.

Literature Review

- Dar's article "Arun Joshi's Use of Symbolism in *The Foreigner*" shows how Joshi employs symbolism to portray Sindi Oberoi's loneliness, rootlessness, and existential crisis, emphasizing his journey from detachment to involvement.
- Kiran Kumar's article "Quest for the Self: Reading Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*" examines Joshi's exploration of selfhood, highlighting Sindi Oberoi's psychological journey and the broader quest for identity across the novel.
- Sanjay Kumar's article "Existential Alienation in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*" analyzes Sindi Oberoi's rootlessness, emotional detachment, and crisis of identity, showing how Joshi portrays alienation as both social estrangement and inner spiritual void.

Problem Statement

This study addresses the critical gap in scholarly analysis of cultural displacement and espoused philosophy in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*. Despite the novel's rich exploration of identity, alienation, and moral transformation, limited research examines how Sindi Oberoi's cultural rootlessness shapes his flawed ideology of detachment and eventual ethical involvement.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in close textual analysis of *The Foreigner*. The novel is examined through critical scrutiny, supported by relevant theoretical frameworks and secondary literary criticism to interpret themes of cultural displacement and espoused philosophy.

Content Analysis

Sindi Oberoi's persistent cultural displacement—shaped by his Kenyan birth, Western education, and Indian ancestry—creates a fractured identity that fuels his espoused philosophy of detachment. His declared non-involvement functions as a defensive ideology, yet the narrative reveals its collapse as he confronts emotional responsibility and ethical commitment.

Sindi's Self-Protective Philosophy

Sindi Oberoi's espoused philosophy of detachment originates not in spiritual awakening but in a deep-seated fear of emotional vulnerability implanted by his uncle's teachings in Nairobi, his native country. The "old, nagging fear of getting involved with anyone, anything" (Joshi 208) becomes a psychological imprint shaping his entire outlook on human relationships. His uncle's warning— "to love is to invite others to break your heart" (Joshi 72)—conditions him into emotional withdrawal. Thus, Sindi comes to associate love not with growth or compassion but with inevitable suffering, adopting detachment as a defensive mechanism rather than a philosophical realisation. This learned avoidance of intimacy, compounded by his cultural rootlessness and orphaned upbringing, renders him incapable of sustaining meaningful human bonds. Ironically, the detachment meant to shield him only deepens his alienation and moral paralysis. Through Sindi, Arun Joshi exposes the hollowness of a self-protective detachment born out of fear rather than wisdom, showing that emotional denial cannot replace genuine understanding of love and responsibility.

The line from Hamlet's third soliloquy, "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (Ham. 3.1.56), is highly appropriate for Sindi Oberoi's character. Hamlet's reflection embodies existential uncertainty, confusion, and paralysis—the very traits Sindi exhibits throughout the novel. His indecision, avoidance of responsibility, and continuous search for meaning closely mirror Hamlet's struggle between action and withdrawal. Sindi's persistent self-questioning and reluctance to commit thus parallel Hamlet's existential dilemma.

Interpersonal Relationship

Surrender Oberoi and June Blyth share an interpersonal relationship that gradually deepens into an emotional and physical bond. Over time, their association grows into one marked by affection, intimacy, and genuine companionship. June, deeply committed to him, consistently seeks closeness and takes the initiative in nurturing their romantic attachment. She becomes the driving force in the relationship, while Surrender, constrained by his persistent fear of responsibility and emotional commitment, responds with characteristic hesitation.

Although he begins to feel affection for her, his attitude remains ambiguous. Whenever confronted with questions demanding clarity, he retreats into his habitual, evasive refrain, "I don't know," a

phrase that becomes symbolic of his emotional evasiveness. This indecisiveness reaches its peak when June proposes marriage, exposing his wavering nature. When she tells him that he sounds "very doubtful," he readily admits, "I am doubtful" (98).

Believing that nothing is real or permanent in life's flux, he rejects the idea of possessing or being possessed. This worldview turns him into a self-styled philosophical orator who relies on abstract reflections to justify his detachment. Although he loves June and inwardly desires emotional security, he projects a contradictory stance: his professed ideals function as a defense mechanism to conceal his fear of commitment. Outwardly, he condemns attachment; inwardly, he yearns for connection, masking this longing behind philosophical scepticism and withdrawal.

After a day of intimacy, when June asks, "Why don't we get married?" (Joshi 96), Sindi attempts to reassure her by insisting, "I am not the right kind of man… Some people are not really cut out for marriage" (96). He further explains the transience he perceives in human emotions: "Nothing ever seems real to me, leave alone permanent. Nothing seems to be very important" (98). While love is often regarded as a vital life force—as G. B. Shaw asserts—the reader is left questioning what, if anything, holds meaning for Sindi in this worldly life.

His negativity becomes evident when he responds to June's hopeful vision of love, happiness, and raising children with deep disbelief. Her reflections challenge his cynicism almost instinctively: "Isn't it worthwhile to love somebody; to make somebody happy; bring up children who contribute to society?" (98). Instead of embracing her optimism, Sindi presses further, asking what follows after these pursuits, reminding her that ultimately everyone must die. If life is destined to dissolve into nothingness, he argues, existence amounts to an empty void. He confronts her bluntly: "And then what? Death wipes out everything, for most of us anyway. All that is left a big zero" (98).

Existential Angst

After suffering a three-day asthmatic attack, Sindi Oberoi is overwhelmed by a profound sense of meaninglessness and purposelessness. He feels as though he has been brought into the world without intention and has continued to live without direction. For him, the true purpose of life lies not in material or sensual gratification but in the attainment of inner peace. He begins to monologue like an ascetic while lying alone in his bed after Karl leaves for work. Sindi articulates his cultural displacement in the following reflection:

Somebody had begotten me without a purpose and so far, I had lived without a purpose. Perhaps, I felt like that because I was a 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 57–58).

Sindi further recognizes that this sense of alienation and emotional detachment has become deeply internalized, shaping an inseparable part of his identity. He realizes that his estrangement is not merely a product of circumstance but rooted within his psyche, offering no apparent path to freedom from its influence. This burden of inward displacement leaves him feeling perpetually unanchored, even in the midst of relationships and experiences that should provide belonging. As he confesses, "My foreignness lay within me and I couldn't leave myself behind wherever I went" (Joshi 58). His introspective monologue reinforces the idea that alienation is not solely an external condition but an inner state of mind.

The narrative underscores an existential truth: when a person feels unloved, unsupported, and emotionally rootless, they inevitably descend into disillusionment and loneliness. Psychologically, such individuals experience an acute sense of isolation—like solitary birds estranged from their flock. Sindi undergoes the same emotional turbulence in Nairobi, Kenya, after his uncle's death. He admits that he had never felt like a foreigner as long as his uncle lived, for the very knowledge of his presence—however distant—offered him a sense of belonging and security. The thought of his uncle in that "small house on the outskirts of Nairobi" gave Sindi the feeling of "having an anchor" (Joshi 58). With his uncle's death, that fragile sense of emotional grounding collapses, leaving him adrift once again in a vast expanse of existential solitude.

In the aftermath, Sindi grows increasingly critical and cynical about life's fundamental truths and inevitable course. His worldview becomes profoundly pessimistic, reducing life to nothing more than a prelude to death. He begins to see human existence as a monotonous cycle where all pursuits and desires ultimately dissolve into the same end. This realization intensifies his sense of futility and alienation, reinforcing his conviction that detachment is the only viable means of navigating life's transience and meaninglessness.

The Ethical Crisis

Having failed in all his papers, Babu turns to Sindi for help and asks him to meet. Sindi, accompanied by June, meets him at "a very expensive restaurant on Park Street for no other reason except the delusion that the more expensive a dinner, the more pleasurable it might be" (Joshi 104). The choice of place reflects Sindi's attempt to console Babu in a superficial manner, showing how both remain caught between appearance and reality. When they settle down, Babu reveals his anxiety over the approaching examinations. Although the dean allows him to continue—mainly because Sindi had intervened—Babu admits that he cannot concentrate. His repeated failures indicate a deeper emotional disturbance rather than academic incapability.

Sindi senses that something more lies behind Babu's distraction. He probes gently and learns

that Babu has fallen in love and that the affair is consuming him. For Babu, the relationship has become overwhelming and has unsettled his sense of direction. When Sindi advises him to marry the girl, Babu confesses that he wishes to marry an American woman but fears his father's disapproval. The conflict between personal desire and familial expectations leaves him emotionally paralysed, further affecting his studies. Such tensions are characteristic of Joshi's fiction; as Arul and Sathiyarajan observe, his characters often "exist in a zone of cultural and emotional ambivalence, unable to reconcile personal impulses with social constraints" (Arul and Sathiyarajan 5).

This conversation becomes a mirror for Sindi himself. Although he professes detachment and claims that involvement only breeds suffering, he is far from living by this principle. Babu's confession makes him aware of his own insecurity. June, deeply in love and ready for commitment, remains unsure of his feelings because of his habitual indecision. Sindi realizes that beneath his façade of detachment lies a profound fear of emotional loss. With rare honesty he admits, "It struck me that I was suddenly afraid. I was afraid of losing June" (Joshi 108). This moment exposes the hollowness of Sindi's philosophy. His fear shows that his detachment is not an enlightened stance but a defense mechanism shaped by insecurity. Critics have noted this contradiction. R. K. Dhawan remarks that Sindi's detachment is "neither spiritual nor philosophical but a psychological shield against involvement" (Dhawan 42). His avoidance of emotional responsibility arises not from insight but from fear. The advice he offers Babu—to act and take responsibility—stands in sharp contrast to his own inability to commit to June. Babu's predicament forces Sindi to confront the gap between his self-image and the truth of his emotional life.

Sindi eventually suffers from an acute sense of guilt, realising that his self-protective philosophy has contributed to the tragedies around him. His detachment, indecision, and evasive conduct become, in his own understanding, the causes of the suffering that overtakes those who cared for him. He holds himself responsible for Babu's death and for June's distressing end, believing that his failure to act responsibly or offer emotional stability shaped their misfortunes. This burden of guilt becomes central to his inner turmoil and marks a turning point in his psychological growth. As he confesses, "All along I had acted out of lust, and greed, and selfishness" (Joshi 4).

The Breach of His Philosophy

Sindi attempts to project an image of innocence, yet he is fundamentally hypocritical, selfish, lust-driven, self-centred, and manipulative. He tries to mislead those around him, recalling Thomas Gray's well-known line from *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, "Where ignorance is bliss, 'Tis folly to be wise" (Gray, line 100). His professed ideology of non-attachment collapses

whenever he confronts genuine human emotions, revealing a theory-in-use that is entirely different from his espoused philosophy. He feels a deep vacuum in June's absence when she expresses her inability to meet him. Though he tries to focus on his laboratory work, he cannot concentrate and senses that he has lost the will to carry out his responsibilities. He realises that he has allowed himself to become an inner battlefield where the child and the adult within him contend without resolution. Reflecting on his state, he admits, "I had become possessive, selfish, and greedy—all that I had struggled against for years… I had lost my will power. I had permitted myself to become a battlefield where the child and the adult warred unceasingly" (Joshi 118).

By the end of the novel, Sindi becomes fully involved with the company's workers, taking responsibility for their livelihoods without waiting for Mr. Khemka's approval. Since Khemka himself faces imprisonment for tax evasion, Sindi steps forward as a responsible figure who motivates the workers to revive the failing company: "There is no reason why we cannot get this place on the right track again" (Joshi 210).

Sindi's life undergoes a decisive shift when he becomes emotionally and physically involved with June Blyth, despite his long-held belief in detachment. He repeatedly experiences emotional disappointment. His affair with June reinforces his conviction that intimacy ultimately results in pain. When she refuses to meet him and grows distant, his idealism collapses, strengthening his belief that attachment is futile. After their intimacy, he admits to her, "It is difficult to be saint" (Joshi 74). He then evaluates the encounter in terms of gains and losses, realising that his coping strategy of non-involvement has failed. Reflecting on this rupture, he confesses after their lovemaking, "Then she fell asleep. I stayed awake counting the broken pieces of my detachment. I counted the gains and the losses mocked me like an abominable joker. Then, I, too, fell asleep" (Joshi 74). This moment marks a break in his self-image and exposes the fragility of his intellectual detachment when confronted with sincere emotion. His relationship with June becomes a defining stage in his emotional and moral development, revealing the contradictions in his professed philosophy and forcing him to acknowledge his vulnerability.

Raised abroad yet tied to India by ancestry, Sindi realises that he fully belongs to neither world. Sheila's remark—"You are still a foreigner. You don't belong here" (Joshi 131)—exposes the hollowness of his belief that returning to India would resolve his identity crisis. This intensifies his existential disillusionment.

Critics also reinforce the idea that June functions as a moral and psychological mirror for Sindi. Arul and Sathiyarajan describe June as the "emotional catalyst who destabilizes Sindi's carefully constructed identity as an outsider" (Arul and Sathiyarajan 4). Her sincerity and clarity stand in sharp contrast to Sindi's habitual withdrawal and

rationalisation. K. R. S. Iyengar notes that June "embodies the emotional centre he lacks and the ethical responsibility he continually evades" (Iyengar 412). Through June, Sindi is compelled to recognise that detachment is not a virtue when used as a shield against responsibility.

June Blyth as a Moral Anchor

June is also depicted as the stabilizing figure in Sindi's otherwise drifting existence. Veena Singh argues that June becomes "the emotional grounding through which Sindi confronts the limitations of his chosen detachment" (Singh 121). Her loyalty to both Babu and Sindi reveals a depth of moral clarity that Sindi lacks. This difference becomes tragically visible after June's death, when Sindi finally realizes that detachment cannot absolve him from the consequences of his choices. Her death becomes, in effect, the moral reckoning that awakens his buried conscience.

Sindi Oberoi: A Victim of the *Return of the Repressed*

Sindi Oberoi in the novel epitomizes a man haunted by *the return of the repressed*, a psychological condition in which suppressed elements of the unconscious resurface to disturb the apparent stability of one's conscious life. Having lost his parents early and growing up rootless between cultures, Sindi submerges his emotional needs and capacity for attachment beneath a self-constructed façade of rationality and detachment. Whenever someone inquires about his parentage or birthplace, he becomes visibly irritated, revealing that he is indeed a victim of the return of the repressed; such questions awaken the buried anxieties and unresolved emotional wounds of his early life. The text suggests that some deep-seated trauma or painful memory linked to his parents has been forcefully repressed, yet it continues to haunt him from within.

His relationships with June and Babu serve as psychological mirrors that reflect his internal conflicts and unacknowledged guilt. What he represses in the name of philosophical detachment—his longing for intimacy, his moral responsibility, and his fear of emotional vulnerability—returns with greater intensity as alienation, anxiety, and self-reproach. Consequently, Sindi becomes a tragic victim of his own psychological repression, unable to harmonize his intellect with his emotions, and ultimately entrapped within the labyrinth of his divided and conflicted self.

Sindi Oberoi: A Self-Untrusted Personality

Through his behaviour with June Blyth, Sindi appears evasive, indecisive, non-committal, and equivocal—traits rooted in his psychology, history, and existential condition. Seeing himself as an "outsider everywhere," he views relationships as temporary and fears emotional closeness, using detachment as a defense against responsibility. His indecision operates as a protective mechanism: if he decides nothing, he remains responsible for nothing. His orphaned childhood and nomadic upbringing impair his ability to form attachments,

making him fear both intimacy and abandonment. Thus, his evasiveness reflects existential anxiety, where commitment appears artificial and detachment seems safer.

Mr. Khemka, Sheila, and Sindi become entangled in an intense cross-examination concerning Babu's death. Sindi argues that Babu was compelled to live up to elite moral expectations by being sent to America. Outwardly, his father appears responsible, but Mr. Khemka rejects this and insists that Babu died because he pursued the wrong American women. He maintains that he instilled proper values in his son. Sindi counters: "Your morality was nice for India. It didn't work in America. That's why I say you gave him a wrong set of memories" (Joshi 127).

Sindi's remark—"Temptation for self-pity is stronger than the devil" (128)—reveals his central psychological conflict. He recognizes self-pity as his most persistent weakness, sustaining his cycle of detachment, guilt, passivity, and alienation. When Sheila asks whether he has any reason to live, he confronts his inner emptiness, acknowledging that the strongest impulse within him is the urge to pity himself.

Earlier, Sindi tells Mr. Khemka that he does not know why he lives, which angers Khemka, who sees Sindi as strange and irresponsible, even calling him "dead." Sheila is disturbed by this. When she presses, "Isn't there anything you want?" (128), Sindi admits that although he desires many things, he does not know how to attain them. He claims instead that he seeks "the courage to live without desire and attachment" (128). For him, "pain" refers to accumulated guilt, alienation, emotional turmoil, and existential confusion. To conquer it means freeing himself from these inner wounds. He tells Sheila, "I merely want to escape pain. I had tried many ways but I had found none" (129).

He feels renewed cultural displacement when Sheila confronts him, saying, "You are still a foreigner. You don't belong here" (131). He confesses that he seeks "an answer to the questions" (128) that his pain has raised, comparing his condition to "swollen carcasses on a river bank after a flood" (128). Sindi speaks this way because he uses his philosophy of desireless action to evade real responsibility. By denying life's purpose, he justifies detachment and avoids emotional and moral duties, presenting "right action without desire" as an excuse for reluctance to commit. He displays traits of moral and emotional cowardice, yet his behaviour stems from deeper existential anxieties rather than simple fear. He hides behind detachment to escape difficult choices. Thus, calling him a coward is only partially accurate; it does not capture the complexity of his psychological state.

This self-untrusted condition reflects his deeper crisis: his intellect urges detachment, while his emotions yearn for connection. The conflict produces moral paralysis, where he neither acts decisively nor finds fulfilment. In Freudian terms,

his ego is trapped between repressed desires (id) and internalized moral demands (superego), resulting in self-doubt and self-reproach. Sindi thus exemplifies a self-untrusted personality—unable to trust his capacity to love, decide, or belong, and tragically imprisoned within this inner uncertainty. After Babu's death, he recognizes that his evasiveness has real consequences, shattering his belief that he can remain uninvolved and deepening his moral disillusionment.

Limitations

This research is limited by its reliance on textual analysis, selective focus on specific aspects of the novel, and the inherent subjectivity of interpretation. Moreover, the absence of empirical evidence or comparative works restricts the broader applicability and generalizability of its conclusions.

Research Findings

The study reveals that Sindi Oberoi's fractured identity—shaped by cultural displacement, orphaned upbringing, and psychological conditioning—fuels his espoused philosophy of detachment. His non-involvement proves a self-protective illusion that collapses when he confronts emotional responsibility, guilt, and ethical crisis. Ultimately, his encounters expose the hollowness of fear-driven detachment.

Conclusion

Sindi behaves evasively and indecisively toward June because his internal foreignness makes him emotionally unstable. His philosophy of detachment clashes with his need for love. His orphaned childhood inhibits emotional commitment. His moral confusion prevents him from making firm decisions. His fear of loss makes him avoid clarity. His existential doubts make him question every relationship. Sindi's existential doubts fuel his detachment, making him hesitant to commit to June. Thus, Sindi's behaviour is not simply personal weakness; it is the central psychological and thematic core of *The Foreigner*.

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