

Narrating the Margins: Subaltern Realities of Alienation, Silence, and Fractured Identity in Arun Joshi's Fiction

Subrat Dwivedi¹

Research Scholar, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kisan Post Graduate College, Bahraich (Uttar Pradesh), India

Dr. Janmejay Kumar Tiwari²

Research Supervisor, Assistant Professor, Department of English, K. S. Saket P.G. College, Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh), India

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Abstract:

Arun Joshi (1939-1993) occupies a unique position in the tradition of Indian English fiction. His fiction consistently explores individuals who stand at the margins of society. His protagonists are alienated, disillusioned, morally displaced, or spiritually restless. They generally belong to the educated, urban, and economically secure segments of society, yet they struggle with a profound sense of alienation and dislocation. This paradox of outward privilege and inner emptiness has made Joshi's work a rich field for critical engagement. Scholars have frequently examined his novels in relation to existentialist concerns about meaning and absurdity, psychological explorations of fractured identity, and sociological critiques of middle-class values. Although Joshi does not portray the subaltern in the conventional postcolonial subject, his protagonists embody psychological and existential subalternity: they remain unheard, unseen, and uninterpreted within the power structures of modern urban India. Through characters such as Sindi Oberoi, Billy Biswas, Ratan Rathor, and Som Bhaskar, Joshi presents the fractured subjectivity of modernity and exposes the silencing forces of bureaucracy, materialism, and capitalist progress.

Building on these interpretations, the present study introduces a contemporary framework by reading Joshi's narratives through the lens of subaltern experience, thereby highlighting the silenced, marginalized, and broken selves that exist even within seemingly privileged social spaces. This study explores how Arun Joshi's major novels depict the subaltern condition. Joshi's novels predominantly depict urban, English-educated characters, yet the subaltern, understood both as socially oppressed groups and as individuals marginalized within the modern Indian middle class, remains a central presence in his narratives. Through close readings of *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), and *The City and the River* (1990), the paper highlights recurring motifs of alienation, silenced voices, fragmented identities, and spiritual estrangement that together shape a unique subaltern sensibility. Drawing on insights from Subaltern Studies, postcolonial discourse, and psychoanalytic

theory, the discussion reveals how Joshi's fractured protagonists embody a subdued critique of modernity and systemic exclusion.

Keywords: Urban, Society, Alienation, Paradox, Fractured narratives, Marginalised, Subaltern, Fragmented.

Introduction:

Postcolonial Indian English fiction persistently grapples with questions of displacement, cultural hybridity, and fractured identity. Writers of this tradition explore the dilemmas of individuals caught between colonial legacies and the pressures of modernity, dramatising the difficulties of belonging in a rapidly transforming social and cultural landscape. Within this discourse, the notion of the "subaltern" has been a central category. Thinkers such as Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasise structural and historical forms of marginalisation, identifying the subaltern as those excluded from political, social, and cultural representation, often including the rural poor, women, and disenfranchised communities. In their view, the subaltern condition is defined by an inability to gain visibility or voice within the dominant narratives of power.

Arun Joshi's fiction, however, complicates and expands this framework. His protagonists, though urban, educated, and apparently privileged, reveal another dimension of subalternity: one rooted in psychological, moral, and spiritual dislocation. Unlike traditional depictions of the subaltern based on economic or social deprivation, Joshi's characters are alienated by their estrangement from society and their failure to articulate inner crises in the public sphere. They are existential outsiders, unable to reconcile themselves with either traditional values or modern aspirations, and therefore remain unheard within the cultural discourse of their time.

For example, Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner* embodies a peculiar sense of rootlessness born from his mixed parentage and global upbringing. Though materially secure, he is alienated from both Indian and Western cultures, never fully belonging to either. His condition highlights a psychological subalternity, a state in which identity fractures into silence and inarticulateness. His famous confession, "*I am a foreigner and I always will be*" (Joshi, *The Foreigner* 34), captures the subalternity of a man who belongs nowhere socially, emotionally, and culturally. Although Sindi moves freely through global spaces like Kenya, the U.S., and India but he remains alienated from the structures around him. He observes society rather than participates in it. His emotional detachment and moral hesitation reveal a consciousness that has internalized marginality. His subalternity lies not in economic deprivation but in existential homelessness. Sindi lacks social roots and requires to assert identity and influence.

Similarly, Billy Biswas in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* rejects his privileged urban life in search of authenticity within a tribal community. He is Joshi's most explicit exploration of subaltern experience. Born into an elite, educated family, he nevertheless feels suffocated by the expectations of postcolonial Indian modernity. He confesses that "*The urge had always been there*" (Joshi, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* 52), is the urge to escape civilization and return to a more primal, human world. His rebellion against the emptiness of modern middle-class existence is dismissed by society as madness, thereby silencing his voice and marking him as an outsider. Billy's trajectory demonstrates how the structures of modernity deny legitimacy to alternative ways of being, forcing the individual into symbolic subalternity. His journey into the tribal community represents a movement from the dominant to the subaltern sphere. When he abandons the "machine-like" urban elite world for the tribal settlement, he aligns himself with a community historically marginalized and silenced. Joshi portrays the tribe not as exotic but as a space of authenticity, dignity, and moral clarity. Such qualities denied in the hierarchical, materialistic urban society. Billy's tragic death at the hands of police encapsulates how the dominant system suppresses subaltern voices. His attempt to cross boundaries becomes intolerable to the urban rational world, which destroys what it cannot understand.

In *The Apprentice*, Ratan Rathor, despite climbing the ladder of bureaucratic success, suffers from moral disillusionment and complicity in systemic corruption. His long silence and eventual confessional narrative symbolize the muted conscience of a post-independence generation. Ratan repeated admission, "*I am a small man,*" (Joshi, *The Apprentice* 9), reveals the subaltern trapped within the corrupt machinery of the state. Unlike Billy, Rathor does not escape the system; instead, he becomes part of the very corruption he despises. His humiliation during the partition riots, his helplessness in front of powerful officers, and his moral compromises illustrate the condition of a man too insignificant to influence the system but too implicated to remain innocent. Ratan's "smallness" is not merely social but moral and psychological. His narrative exposes the middle-class subaltern those individuals crushed between their ideals and the authoritarian state.

Another character Som Bhasker's obsession with desire and meaning in *The Last Labyrinth*, summarized in his repeated cry, "*I want, I want, I want*" (Joshi, *The Last Labyrinth* 178), reveals the hollowness behind capitalist accumulation. Although wealthy and influential, Som is spiritually impoverished, emotionally crippled, and unable to understand the labyrinth of his own desires. Joshi turns the gaze inward: Som is a subaltern of his own psyche. His failure in love, faith, and self-understanding indicate that material prosperity cannot compensate for inner fragmentation. His desire for Anuradha becomes symbolic of his desire for purpose that forever unfulfilled in a world governed by power and profit.

Finally, *The City and the River*, depict not just individual alienation but collective subjugation, where an authoritarian regime suppresses dissent, reducing the masses to a voiceless, broken entity. In this dystopian vision, Joshi exposes the systemic production of silence and fragmentation within modern structures of power. Here, Joshi constructs allegorical subalternity through the faceless masses oppressed by the authoritarian Grand master. While the novel avoids direct quotation for analysis, its narrative exposes how totalitarian power silences citizens until they become voiceless shadows. Joshi's portrayal of the city is impersonal, oppressive, heavily controlled and reveals how modern systems convert entire populations into subaltern subjects, devoid of agency of voice.

Thus, Joshi's protagonists illustrate a broader spectrum of subaltern experience. They reveal that subalternity need not be confined to the materially dispossessed but can also manifest in those spiritually disinherited and existentially silenced. Their alienation, silences, and fractured selves dramatise the limitations of postcolonial modernity, exposing the hollowness of material progress and the absence of authentic fulfilment.

This paper argues, therefore, that Arun Joshi's fiction offers an alternative model of subaltern consciousness, one rooted in psychology, morality, and spirituality rather than being confined to purely social or economic marginalisation. By focusing on the broken selves of educated urban Indians, Joshi critiques the inner failures of postcolonial society and demonstrates how alienation and silence can constitute forms of subalternity. His novels thus enrich the discourse on postcolonial literature by illuminating the invisible struggles of those caught not at the margins of class, but at the margins of meaning itself.

Subaltern Dimensions of Alienation:

Alienation emerges as one of the most persistent and defining motifs in Arun Joshi's fiction. His novels repeatedly explore the condition of individuals who, despite social privilege or professional achievement, remain estranged from society, history, and even themselves. In *The Foreigner*, Sindi Oberoi, a character of mixed parentage and cosmopolitan upbringing, embodies the fractured consciousness of the postcolonial Indian who feels at home nowhere. His cultural hybridity distances him from traditional Indian society, while his immersion in Western values fails to grant him any real sense of belonging. What results is a profound condition of rootlessness that reflects a psychological dimension of subalternity. In Sindi's case, marginalisation is not caused by material deprivation but by an existential homelessness, a state of being unable to locate identity or meaning within any cultural framework.

The theme of alienation also dominates *The Apprentice*, where the protagonist Ratan Rathor rises within the bureaucratic ranks of independent India yet remains deeply unsettled by moral guilt and disillusionment. His personal conflict is not economic but ethical, as he becomes complicit in corruption and moral decay while losing his capacity for authentic action. Ratan's alienation is thus an alienation of conscience, a haunting awareness that

reveals the deep fissures within the nation's post-independence ethos. The narrative illustrates how alienation can silence ethical responsibility, reducing individuals to passive participants in systems of exploitation. In this sense, Ratan epitomises a different form of subalternity, where the individual is rendered powerless not by external poverty but by an internal paralysis of the moral self.

Together, these novels highlight Joshi's unique approach to alienation as subalternity. By portraying characters who are privileged yet voiceless, educated yet broken, he underscores how marginalisation in postcolonial India extends beyond material conditions to include the psychological and spiritual crises of those trapped between competing cultural and ethical worlds.

Joshi also foregrounds psychological alienation, where the self becomes fractured under the pressures of moral ambiguity and ethical compromise. Characters such as Sindi Oberoi (*The Foreigner*), Ratan Rathor (*The Apprentice*), and Billy Biswas (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*) experience an acute sense of inner division. Their alienation stems from a disjunction between inner values and external realities, producing a fractured identity that resists easy reconciliation. This fractured selfhood constitutes a vital aspect of subalternity, as these individuals lack the cultural or ideological space to articulate their dissent meaningfully.

Furthermore, Joshi's representation of alienation intersects with existential philosophy, particularly themes of absurdity, freedom, guilt, and responsibility. However, unlike Western existentialism, Joshi's vision is deeply inflected by Indian philosophical traditions, especially concepts of dharma, detachment, and spiritual quest. The failure to achieve spiritual anchorage in a morally hollow society compounds the alienation of his characters, situating them as subaltern figures estranged not only from society but also from the self.

Another significant dimension of subaltern alienation in Joshi's novels is moral displacement. The protagonists often confront ethical dilemmas that expose the hollowness of institutional structures like bureaucracy, corporate power, and social hierarchies. Their resistance to corruption or moral compromise further marginalises them, as society privileges conformity over conscience. In this context, alienation emerges as both a personal crisis and a social critique, highlighting the cost of integrity in a materialistic and morally indifferent world.

To conclude, Arun Joshi's novels offer a sensitive and layered representation of alienation as a defining feature of subaltern existence in postcolonial Indian society. By focusing on psychological depth, silence, fractured identity, and moral conflict, Joshi

expands the subaltern discourse to include the inner lives of urban, educated individuals who remain excluded from meaningful participation in dominant narratives.

The Politics of Silence and Voicelessness:

Silence occupies a crucial place in Arun Joshi's fiction, functioning not only as a recurring motif but also as a defining condition of subalternity. Many of his protagonists struggle to express their inner turmoil, their voices stifled by social expectations, cultural pressures, or the limits of language itself. This inability to articulate personal suffering resonates with Gayatri Spivak's influential assertion that the subaltern "cannot speak," for Joshi's characters repeatedly embody this condition of muted existence, where expression is either denied or rendered meaningless within dominant structures of power.

In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, the theme of silence acquires particular force. Billy, born into privilege and trained for a successful career, abandons his urban comforts to seek truth and authenticity within a tribal community. His radical departure from bourgeois society is not understood as a meaningful act of resistance but is instead dismissed as madness or eccentricity. The dominant discourse of modernity, with its rigid definitions of rationality and success, effectively erases Billy's voice and silences his search for authenticity. His rebellion may be interpreted as a form of subaltern protest against the alienation of urban modern life, yet the system refuses to grant legitimacy to his voice, relegating him to silence.

The motif of silence appears in another significant way in *The Apprentice*. Ratan Rathor, after years of complicity in corruption and moral compromise, eventually recounts his life in the form of a belated confession. His narrative is marked by hesitation, delay, and the weight of silence that has dominated his existence for decades. His inability to speak earlier, when resistance might have carried meaning, reflects how systemic oppression and personal fear conspire to mute ethical voices. The confessional mode he finally adopts does not undo the silence of his past but instead exposes the depth of his voicelessness. His late articulation is itself symbolic of subalternity: it is a voice that emerges too late, shaped more by regret than by resistance.

Silence in Joshi's fiction, therefore, is not mere absence of speech but a profound metaphor for suppressed identities and unacknowledged truths. It reflects the condition of individuals who, although not socially marginalized in the conventional sense, are rendered voiceless by psychological conflict, cultural alienation, and systemic coercion. In this way, Joshi presents silence as both symptom and symbol of subalternity, underscoring how certain experiences remain inexpressible within the rigid frameworks of postcolonial modernity.

In sum, Arun Joshi's novels powerfully interrogate the politics of silence and voicelessness as central aspects of postcolonial and subaltern experience. Silence in his fiction is not merely an absence of speech but a politically charged condition produced by

social structures, moral hierarchies, and ideological constraints. Joshi portrays individuals whose voices are suppressed or rendered ineffective within dominant systems of power, thereby exposing the subtle mechanisms through which marginalisation operates in post-Independence Indian society.

Shattered Selves and Dislocated Identities:

Joshi's protagonists are consistently portrayed as figures with fragmented identities and disintegrated selves. Their inner turmoil reflects not simply personal weakness but a larger spiritual crisis that mirrors the collapse of values in a postcolonial society struggling to reconcile its inherited traditions with the disruptive forces of modernity. The fragmentation of the self becomes a metaphor for the fractured consciousness of a nation caught in transition, where neither the past nor the present offers stable ground for identity or meaning.

In *The City and the River*, Joshi expands the scope of alienation beyond individual struggles to encompass an entire society. The novel presents a dystopian world dominated by authoritarian power, where freedom, morality, and individuality are systematically eroded. Under the rule of the Grand Master, citizens are reduced to silence, submission, and fear, their voices drowned out by oppressive structures. In this context, the subaltern condition is no longer confined to isolated characters but extends to the collective, revealing how political systems institutionalise fragmentation and prevent authentic resistance. The dystopian setting dramatises how unchecked power perpetuates brokenness at both the individual and societal levels.

The theme of fractured selves in Joshi's fiction is not limited to *The City and the River*. Characters such as Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner* and Ratan Rathor in *The Apprentice* embody inner fragmentation through their inability to integrate personal desire, cultural belonging, and moral responsibility. Billy Biswas, too, represents a divided self, torn between the allure of modern success and the yearning for primal authenticity. Each of these figures illustrates how the inability to harmonise conflicting values leads to brokenness and silence.

The motif of broken selves thus underscores the universal dimension of Joshi's exploration of subalternity. His characters are not merely isolated individuals but representatives of a broader postcolonial consciousness fractured by contradictions between material advancement and spiritual emptiness. By depicting both personal and collective disintegration, Joshi reveals that the crisis of modern India lies not only in its external inequalities but also in its inability to reconcile progress with moral and spiritual wholeness. His vision suggests that the subaltern condition is as much an inner experience of fragmentation as it is an external condition of oppression.

In light of the above, Arun Joshi's novels offer a penetrating exploration of the fractured nature of selfhood and the instability of identity in postcolonial Indian society. His protagonists are frequently portrayed as individuals whose sense of self is deeply fragmented by social pressures, moral dilemmas, and existential uncertainty. This fragmentation results in shattered selves and dislocated identities, reflecting the psychological and cultural crises experienced by individuals navigating the contradictions of modernity and tradition

Conclusion:

Arun Joshi's novels map the psychological landscape of postcolonial India and revealing forms of subalternity rooted not only in class and caste but in alienation, modern disintegration, emotional exile, and the spiritual poverty of modern life. His characters-Sindi, Billy, Ratan, and Som all struggle to assert their identities in a world that prioritizes power, profit, and conformity. Through carefully drawn interiorities and symbolic narratives, Joshi expands the meaning of the subaltern: the marginalized is not only the economically deprived but also the spiritually wounded, the emotionally alienated, the ethically compromised, and the existentially lost. His fiction thus becomes a profound meditation on the unheard voices within the modern Indian self.

Arun Joshi's fiction demonstrates that the idea of subalternity cannot be limited to material deprivation or social exclusion alone; it also extends into the psychological, moral, and spiritual domains of human life. His protagonists, estranged from society, silenced by circumstance, and fragmented within themselves, embody the hidden consciousness of postcolonial India, a nation outwardly pursuing progress yet inwardly haunted by disillusionment. Sindi Oberoi's sense of rootlessness in *The Foreigner*, Ratan Rathor's burden of guilt in *The Apprentice*, Billy Biswas's rejection of bourgeois values in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, and the voiceless masses in *The City and the River* all dramatise the existential and moral crises of individuals who are unable to find coherence or meaning in a fractured modern world.

Viewing these characters as symbolic subalterns allows for a richer understanding of Joshi's contribution to Indian English literature. His narratives reveal how alienation, silence, and fragmentation function as forms of marginalisation that are just as oppressive as economic exploitation. By exploring the invisible struggles of individuals who fail to articulate their inner turmoil within dominant cultural and political frameworks, Joshi critiques the emptiness of modern life and questions the very foundations of identity, belonging, and authenticity.

Thus, Arun Joshi emerges as a writer deeply invested in unveiling the subtler layers of subalternity. Though he does not primarily depict the materially dispossessed, his works give voice to another kind of dispossession, namely the loss of self, the silencing of conscience, and the erosion of spiritual wholeness. In doing so, his novels expand the discourse of subaltern studies and underscore the fact that brokenness and silence, whether

personal or collective, constitute powerful dimensions of subaltern experience in postcolonial India. Thus, Joshi's novels collectively reveal the multifaceted nature of subaltern experience in modern India. Whether through the existential homelessness of Sindi Oberoi, the tribal marginality reclaimed by Billy Biswas, the bureaucratic diminishment of Ratan Rathor, or the psychological imprisonment of Som Basker, Joshi diagnoses the silencing forces at work in postcolonial society. His fictions demonstrates that subalternity is not confined to economic or social categories but pervades the inner life of individuals living in a world governed by materialism, bureaucracy, and fractured identities. In expanding the concept of the subaltern to include existential, psychological, and spiritual dimensions, Joshi offers a profound critique of modernity and a compelling portrait of the invisible wounds borne by marginalized selves.

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