

Existentialism and Spiritual Inquiry in the Poetry of Umashankar Joshi: A Modernist Approach to Gujarati Literature

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the intersection of existentialism and spiritual inquiry in the poetry of Umashankar Joshi, one of the most significant modernist poets of Gujarat. An analysis is done of his major works to understand how Joshi grapples with—and ultimately resolves—some of the most fundamental and profound inquiries concerning existence, including but not limited to the seemingly universal nature of human suffering, the genuinely social aspect of formless and void alienation, and the almost Sisyphean task of searching for—and sometimes failing to find—a meaning to life's riddles and conundrums. While deeply enmeshed with modern existentialism, Joshi's poetry is conversant and comfortable with Indian spiritualities, rooting his Gandhian and philosophically Vedantic/Upanishadic values in his poetry. He consistently blends traditional poetic forms with modernist poetic experimentation without losing a coherent narrative and symbolic richness. The present study examines Joshi's poetry and argues that he may offer a bridge between modern philosophical introspection and literary innovation.

KEYWORDS: Umashankar Joshi, Gujarati modernism, existentialism, spiritual inquiry, human suffering, Gandhian philosophy, Indian literature.

I. INTRODUCTION

Umashankar Joshi (1911-1988) is one of the great modern figures of Gujarati literature. His work in poetry, drama, novels, and essays truly multiplies his significant contributions to the field. Joshi was at the center of an unforgettable transformation of Gujarati literature during the post-independence era. In modern poetry, he laid down some very fine parameters. His vision while working within the poetic form transcended the conventional boundaries. His abundant body of work, comprising vital poetry collections such as *Nishith* (1939) and *Vishwashanti* (1931), engages not just with existentialist philosophy but also with spiritual thought. It creates a strange Bermuda Triangle of sorts in the literary world, where seemingly disparate philosophical traditions converge. Dhirubhai Thaker states: Umashankar Joshi's first appearance on the literary scene of Gujarat with his well-known *khandakuavya* (narrative lyric) *Vishvashaanti* (1931), duly introduced by Kakasaheb Kalelker, was hailed by Narasinharao Divatia, a literary giant of pre-Gandhian era, as a significant event that ushered in a new epoch in Gujarati literature; his exit (1988) was lamented as an irreparable loss to the literary world. (91)

The modernist movement that swept through Gujarati literature in the mid-20th century found not merely a participant but a pioneering visionary in Joshi, who reimagined the possibilities of language, form, and content. His poetry, portrayed by its experimental kind, metaphysical depth, and ground-breaking linguistic structures, represents the modernist spirit while remaining deeply rooted in Indian cultural and spiritual traditions. This dual allegiance, modernist innovation coupled with traditional wisdom, makes Joshi's work of particular significance in any understanding of how non-Western literary traditions have engaged with and transformed modernist impulses. M.V. Desai calls him a versatile writer for two reasons: "He is steeped deep in our classical literature and is at the same time at home with the best there is in modern Indian and European Literatures," and secondly due to "his critical acumen and his virtuosity in critical thought" (115).

The study scans the existential and spiritual themes that permeate Joshi's poetry, probing how his work steers the territories of human alienation, pain, and the search for meaning while simultaneously chasing metaphysical queries and spiritual comprehensions. By fathoming these extents of his poetry, we can see how Joshi shaped a distinctive poetic voice that expresses both the modern condition of existential anxiety and the timeless quest for spiritual enlightenment. It also demonstrates that Joshi's greatest achievement lies in his ability to forge a poetic vision that does not just waver between existentialism and spirituality but blends them into an amalgamated philosophical perspective on human existence.

II. UMASHANKAR JOSHI AND GUJARATI MODERNISM

The late twentieth century saw the birth of modernism in Gujarati literature, and with it came a striking break from the old literary traditions. This is a revolution reflecting the massive, wider social, political, and cultural changes in post-colonial India. United with this revolution, Umashankar Joshi emerged as a central figure in the modernist drive in Gujarati literature. His contributions to this drive must be understood in the rapid-change historical context. He was a part of the earthquake that shook the certainties of the old traditionalists. Joshi, in his article, mentions: It is the post-1930-35 period that shows, in glaring contrast to the Renaissance period, the signs of modernism, namely, the tendency to divorce itself from the so-called realism and achieve a sort of 'innerness,' a zealous quest for the appropriate form and technique, and in particular its search for the right word, the genuinely poetic language. ("Modernism and Indian Literature" 22)

Joshi's modernist susceptibility exhibited in multiple extents of his work. Strictly, he broke away from the unyielding metrical structures that had dominated Gujarati poetry, introducing free verse and experimental forms that permitted for greater expressive liberty. His language, while drawing from classical Gujarati literary traditions, introduced new rhythms, unexpected juxtapositions, and a more conversational tone that reflected the spoken language of contemporary Gujarat. These formal advances were not simply aesthetic picks but echoed a deeper philosophical pledge to finding new kinds of expression needed to know the complexities of modern experience.

The poetry of Joshi, content-wise, entered into psychological realms that had been mostly untouched in earlier Gujarati literature. His oeuvre penetrated deep into the fragmented consciousness of the modern individual, examining states of anxiety and alienation, and hewing out a niche as a heavyweight contender for poetry's ongoing dialogue with established social and religious norms. Of course, it wasn't all gloom and doom in Joshi's camp. He enacted a light-hearted wit and whimsy in several of his works, which led to them being seen as puzzled, befuddled, or simply neutered acts of modernism. If there was anything undeniably modernist about Joshi, it was his fragmented narrative style. The collection *Nishith*, published in 1939, marks poet Joshi's vital break with traditional Gujarati poetry and his clasp of modern aesthetics. Critics perceive that this work set the stage for ensuing modernist experimentation in the language, affecting a generation of younger poets. They further note that the collection's haunting imagery, fragmented structures, and profound psychological insights established a new sensibility in the Gujarati poetic tradition.

Joshi's input to Gujarati modernism is especially noteworthy for its signature transformation of an imported Western aesthetic into an authentic Indian expression of cultural and philosophical concern. Joshi did not simply mimic European modernist tropes; he adapted modernist poetic techniques to articulate specifically Gujarati experiences and concerns. His "indigenization" of modernism constitutes a crucial bridge across which he carries the poetic language of both (1) universal human concerns and (2) locally specific, culturally relevant realities.

III. EXISTENTIAL THEMES IN JOSHI'S POETRY

Umashankar Joshi's poetry has something quite unique and significant about it—existential qualities. For his entire poetic lifespan, Joshi seemed to be consumed with a few, rather difficult, fundamental questions concerning human suffering and alienation, our freedom to choose, and the almost universal search for meaning in an indifferent universe. A very close reading of Joshi's poetry reveals with crystalline clarity that it is a searing examination of the human condition with which he is concerned—a condition that resonates powerfully with a certain segment of Western existentialist thought and yet is thoroughly rooted in something distinctly Indian. In his groundbreaking collection "Nishith," Joshi probes the depths of existential despair and the misery of the poet's condition. He presents the reader with vital pictures of isolation and the spiritual hollowness of life. The poem "Nishith," which shares the collection's title, most directly addresses the poet's existential angst. Midnight is not only a temporal backdrop; it is also a metaphor for the darkest aspects of human awareness. To encounter the self at this hour is to see it with the absoluteness of a good, bright light illuminating all the nooks and dark corners one would rather leave unseen. It is the hour of truth. It is also an hour of absurdity. Joshi writes:

With all his brilliance, the Sun
could not see
the soft lustre of the skies.
The Midnight perceived
with his eyes of darkness

every tiny bud blossoming in the cosmic woods. (Joshi & Yashaschandra 83)

His works explore themes of alienation and estrangement, not only from society but also from oneself. Joshi writes in "Chhinnabhinna Chhu":

I am sad day and night, night and day

Struggling to find the center, I am anguished,

And shattered into flying fragments all around. (Panna 105)

They express in verse the pain that leads to the discovery of a precious secret: that groping in darkness is a necessary prelude to finding the light. The secret, which is revealed in almost all of Joshi's poetry, is that an individual must journey through the shadows of aloneness in order to be reborn into the sunlight of a realized, true self.

In Joshi's existential inquiries, symbolism and metaphor hold about as essential a role as the poet's recurring motifs. These motifs—bleak landscapes, decaying structures, shadowy figures—might be said to form a kind of symbolic language through which Joshi expresses the existential dilemma, the "situation of man in the decreasing sanity of a world uninhabitable for ordinary human beings." It is a language in which the sea often serves as a symbol of both chaos and potential liberation, while darkness is not merely the absence of light, but a fertile void from which new insights might arise. There are clear similarities between the existential themes of Joshi and those of Western existentialists like Sartre and Camus. But distinctions also emerge. Unlike the atheistic existentialism popular in Western thought, Joshi's poetry opens itself to transcendent possibilities, even in its bleakest moments. His existentialism seems less connected to the human-centered philosophy of Paul Sartre (who claimed that existence precedes essence) and more aligned with a version of cosmic justice that defines the poetry of William Blake and the philosophy of G. K. Chesterton.

IV. SPIRITUAL INQUIRY IN JOSHI'S WORK

The spiritual dimensions of Umashankar Joshi's poetry do not indicate a break with his existential themes; indeed, they are an essential counterbalance. Through all of his work, Joshi undertakes a serious spiritual quest, drawing from the well of different Indian philosophical traditions, while also keeping his ears and eyes open to modern reality: Like T. S. Eliot, Umashankar turned from verse to verse-play. A genius of high magnitude tends to express itself in all three voices, lyrical, narrative, and dramatic, simultaneously. Umashankar has tried the form of poetic drama in *Praacheenaa* (1944) and *Mahaaprasthaan* (1965), which contain seven pieces each, based on themes taken from the Mahabharata, Bhagawata, the Ramayana, and the Jataka tales (Thaker 101).

This spiritual quest is not one marked by dogmatic declarations; rather, it is an honest inquiry. "His meaning of spirituality was in knowing the self" (Choudhari 51). It is a quest that takes Joshi and the audience with him, through a series of metaphysical dilemmas that refuse to yield easy answers, while also maintaining a belief in the possibility of an ultimately transcendent significance. Joshi's anthology, *Vishwashanti* (World Peace), expresses his spiritual vision most clearly. Written during World War II, these poems are beyond personal existential reflections and deal with universal themes of amity, concord, and interconnectedness. The titular poem "Vishwashanti" gives an idea of spiritual unison that transcends sectarian barriers.

The global spiritual perspective in poems reflects the influence of Gandhian philosophy on Joshi's worldview. Gandhi's principles of non-violence (ahimsa), truth (satya), and the interconnectedness of all life are enunciated throughout Joshi's works, although in a poetic rather than doctrinal shape. Joshi takes these absolute mandates from Gandhi and converts them into a series of profound and poetic spiritual insights. He meditates upon the implications of these turnarounds for individual consciousness and the way we all share this existence. Also prominently featured in Joshi's spiritual inquiries is the influence of Vedantic philosophy and Upanishadic thought. Some poems directly engage with the Advaita Vedanta notion of the intrinsic unity of Atman (individual consciousness) and Brahman (universal consciousness). Yet, Joshi's interaction with these traditions is neither uncritical nor simply reverential. Instead, he reinterprets ancient wisdom through the lens of contemporary experience, questioning how traditional spiritual insights can shed light on present-day challenges. What makes Joshi's spiritual exploration unique is its thematic coexistence with his existential concerns. His poetry does not portray spirituality as a means of evading an encounter with existential dread. Rather, it suggests that authentic spiritual insight must be earned through the hard life lessons taught by an existential crisis. Take, for instance, his poem "Antar Yatra" (Inner Journey). Its opening lines set the tone for a work that will lead the reader into the very heart of a quest for spirituality that begins at the juncture of genuine existential angst.

The fusion of spiritual exploration with existential questioning produces a distinctive philosophical position we could call "existential spirituality"—an angle of vision that acknowledges the actual state of human alienation and suffering while insisting that such experiences can serve as gateways to a dramatically deeper and more potent spiritual realization. This enables Joshi to sail between the oft-accrued nihilism of existentialism and the oft-accrued escapism of certain brands of spirituality. Resulting in a poetic vision, the two-fold hallmark of which is that it honors both the shadows of human experience and the potential for transcendent meaning.

Fusion of Traditional and Modernist Forms : The significance of Gujarati literature numbers among those of the immense weight of Umashankar Joshi, who not only carried forward the tradition of Indian poetry but also gave it new shapes and forms. He occupied a rare bastion where he was both a traditional poet and an innovator of modern forms, and in his life and work, he straddles those two worlds. At the same time, he reflects a very unique philosophy, which is a blend of existentialism and Indian spirituality. One of the outstanding hallmarks of Joshi's work is that it has much in common with the poetry of transition; the kind of stuff that is not erasable. M.V. Desai mentions:

When, during the 1950s, younger poets began to write trendy poems, with marriage, a bus ride, or a fast breaking neatly into stanzas, it was Umashankar who experimented in the widest variety of ways and wrote some of the finest of the new poetry (114). Joshi's early works were mastered with traditional Gujarati meters and forms, as well as classical structures from Sanskrit. But with "Nishith," he began to play with free verse and smooth rhythms that might better represent the modern experience. This was not a rejection of tradition, but an evolution toward forms that might catch the complexities of modern life better. Even so, his most radical pieces seem to hang onto some kind of tradition, thus creating a dynamic tension between what seems *old* and what is clearly new. According to M.V. Desai: *Nishith* ("Midnight"; 1939) holds a mirror to the longings and ideals of the 1930s, years of uneasiness and agony, of ambition and aspirations, of love songs with the lilt of folk music, lyrics, outbursts of passion which still are not declamations or manifestos to change the world but poetic pilgrimage to see, to understand and to love the ways of the world. (113)

Joshi's use of language embodies the coming together of traditional and modernist ways of thinking. He comes from a long line of rich classical Gujarati and Sanskrit traditions, but he also uses the forms of language and expression that you would expect of a modern poet. He makes up words, when necessary, lightly and joyfully; he uses colloquial Gujarati when it serves him; he employs sufficient classical phrasing and structure to keep the classical poets of yore in mind. Most of all, he gives a good 21st-century blend of language and expression. Joshi's poems are modernist in structure, though they often employ traditional poetic elements. This makes them feel both contemporary and timeless. Formally, they frequently use components like juxtaposition, fragmentation, and non-linear progression. They do not always "tell" a story in the traditional sense. Works like "Chinnabhinna chhu" (I am Fragmented) are much more interested in exploring something like "psychological" as well as narrative disintegration. They are concerned with how elements of form and content suggest the kinds of action that lead to the psychological states that result in characters doing certain things. Thaker writes: "In 1956, he wrote the poem 'Chhinnabhinna Chhun,' which has become a turning point as well as the landmark of modern consciousness. He is so much distressed by the chaotic condition all around that he is annoyed even by the cuckoo's coo" (99).

Joshi's narrative style embraces both the modern complexity we find in so many of today's works and the timeless wisdom of bygone days. It is both, and it is neither contemporary nor classic. His style not only serves a particular function in the work but is also significant in and of itself, like so much good poetry. Joshi's poetry often takes associative leaps rather than making a logical progression and creates meaning with "resonance and echo" instead of direct statements. In this, he emulates modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot and also classical Sanskrit poets who employed suggestive indirection. Ineffable, existential, and spiritual questions crop up in his work, but Joshi avoids reducing them to simple statements. In Joshi's work, this formal hybridity has significant effects on literary history. Modernism, if we see it as an import from the West, is something that Joshi seems unsure about embracing completely. He shows through his work that traditional forms and modernist techniques can engage in a productive dialogue, and that the result of that dialogue can be "Indian modernism"—a term that Joshi himself apparently does not apply to his poetry but describes it well.

Joshi's Philosophical Insights on Society : The poetic vision of Umashankar Joshi is not limited to personal existential dilemmas and spiritual pursuits; it reaches out to encompass wider social and ethical issues. Myriad as they are, what Joshi's poems tell us about social justice, moral obligation, and the welfare of the community wasn't always easy to decipher. But there's a persistency of purpose to his work, and it shines through in his verses. Whether or not they speak to you directly, they provoke in you some manner of ethical discourse. He envisions a New Age in which principles of justice, dignity, and mutual respect serve as the avenues for effecting social change. In his poems, he addresses the issues of economic disparity and social stratification with such unwavering clarity that it is hard to see how one could interpret his work as anything other than pro-labor and pro-egalitarian. This account of society is primed by Gandhian principles of justice and equality, yet it is manifested through Joshi's distinctive poetic idiom. Like Gandhi, Joshi accentuates the interconnection between personal moral transformation and societal change, proposing that genuine societal reform must start with the individual's ethical commitment. "He taught to cultivate aesthetic taste based on the spirit of humanity" (Thaker 109).

Umashankar Joshi's social beliefs are prompted by Gandhian principles, especially nonviolence, truth, and moral integrity. In his interview, he mentions: "What is significant is the fact that the phenomenon called Gandhi released the creative energies in the life and letters of Gujarat. By 1930, it was a stupendous tidal wave" ("Interview with Umashankar Joshi" 4). His poems explore the political implications of these values and examine their inherent philosophical consequences. For Joshi, as for Gandhi, nonviolence is not a tactic, a mere approach to social conflict; it is an ethics, a fundamental orientation toward the recognition of the essential unity of all life. Similarly, 'Satya' in Joshi's poetry is not simply a matter of factual accuracy. It is also, and especially, an alignment of inner conviction with outward action. The consistent focus on the spiritual and existential aspects of social issues sets Joshi's social philosophy apart from simple political commentary. He thinks social formations mirror the collective consciousness of humans. If we want to create a truly changed society, we must not only act politically but also rouse a slumbering spiritual force within humanity. This perspective allows Joshi to avoid both simplistic idealism and cynical lack of hope. He instead offers a distinctly more complex vision of not only possible but probable social change. And the important thing is, this change could take place even in societies that have pretty significant built-in obstacles to change, like the kind of society we live in.

Joshi's method of handling social themes demonstrates his ability to combine unique knowledge of specific cultural contexts with a grasp of universal ethical principles. He expresses values of universal significance, but his poetry, while addressing such values, remains deeply anchored in Indian—and often specifically Gujarati—cultural contexts. This provides a unique grounding from which his social philosophy issues forth, and it gives him a unique voice with which to make broad, human-interest pronouncements.

V. CONCLUSION

The poetic legacy of Umashankar Joshi is nourished by his ability to create a unique literary vision that connects, in a most effective way, apparently unrelated philosophical and aesthetic traditions. In his poetic works, Joshi moves with ease and grace through the unfathomable seas of existential angst and spiritual yearning, modernist experimentation and traditional forms, poetry of individual consciousness and that which speaks to social responsibility. His contributions to both Gujarati literature and modern poetry as a whole are marked by a most singular and rare talent for synthesis. If you look into the poetry of Joshi, a thinker replete with profound ideas, you will find something vigorous and alive with the human condition; themes of suffering, alienation, and the pursuit of meaning are rendered elemental and essential in Joshi's powerful works. Not one to shy away from the darker aspects of human existence, he nevertheless renders elemental what is vibrant in poetry that places him in conversation with the Western tradition of existentialist thinkers while at the same time maintaining a unique Indian philosophical perspective.

In a like manner, Joshi's spiritual journeys show how age-old wisdom can be recast in the light of modernity. He takes the fundamental ideas of ancient Indian thought—like the philosophy of the Upanishads, or the way of Gandhi, or some other strand of Indian wisdom—and weaves them into a contemporary spiritual garb that speaks meaningfully to the realities of modern life. His method avoids the twin pitfalls of uncritical traditionalism (which fails to see the unique demands of a bygone age versus our own) and disjointed modernism (which has little use for the profound insights of the past). Joshi also "argues for an Indian critical perspective that alone will help us evaluate our literature free from Western prejudices" (Satchidananda 42).

The blending of traditional elements with modernist techniques in Joshi's work serves as a formal paradigm of literary innovation—indeed, as a blend of Indian and global paradigms. In technique, Joshi showcases how the poetry of the Gujarati (and, by extension, Indian) language can engage with global literary movements while simultaneously maintaining a unique identity and set of concerns. Thus, for all his pathfinding, Joshi also embodies an extension of the Indian and Gujarati tradition into the worldwide poetry of the 21st century. The integrative vision of Joshi's thought is shown in the social and ethical dimensions that inform it. He connects existential questioning and spiritual insight to specific kinds of social problems. This makes him a kind of social philosopher. But one with more depth than is common, for he tends to articulate issues at a quite fundamental level.

Joshi's profundity makes a substantial difference in some of the ways he addresses and posits social philosophical questions. This multifaceted accomplishment makes Joshi a lasting force in Gujarati literature. Since his passing around a decade ago, his poetry has been freshly rediscovered by the new generation of Gujarati poets. What these younger poets find in Joshi's work is not only a brilliant vision of modernity they can relate to but also a potent blueprint for a kind of engaged modernism that allows the poet to retain his or her own cultural and spiritual roots while still being in touch with the realities of contemporary existence. In the end, it may be that the most important thing Umashankar Joshi achieved was showing that two seemingly opposite kinds of philosophy can coexist. These are (1) the kind that is all about the individual and (2) the kind that is centered on groups of people or society as a whole. The apparent oppositions in Joshi's poetry seem to be entering into productive dialogue and negotiating some kind of uneasy peace. What Joshi is doing in these poems is not only enriching Gujarati literature but also performing the kind of philosophical and literary sleight of hand that makes a more comprehensive and visionary kind of modern dialogue possible.

In modern Gujarati literature, few figures are more prominent than Umashankar Joshi, and the admiration and critique he receives seem to rise proportionate to his significant influence and stature. This is partly due to Joshi's lyrical mastery and forays into the beautiful-hued metaphors characteristic of such a modernist sensibility, as well as his philosophical depth and intellectual obligation to poetry, which has led some critics to claim he leans too much on the intellectual side in his writing, making it at times too difficult for the common reader to grasp. Indeed, on certain occasions, especially in his existentialist poems, he risks becoming a bit too steeped in the abstract and, in doing so, lacks a reasonable emotional immediacy that one feels poetry ought to have. Regardless, the next generations have felt Joshi's influence deeply. Because of his audacity in playing with form, he is mostly an ancestor of our poets who work outside poetic convention. The heartfelt themes he embedded in his form experiments make him an important figure for poets who wish to use the poetic canvas to explore big socio-political and existential themes.

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