

# SINDI'S JOURNEY FROM DETACHMENT TO INVOLVEMENT IN *THE FOREIGNER*: A STUDY

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**Abstract:** In this novel, Joshi shows how the absence of meaningful relation becomes the greatest curse in Sindi's life. It deals with the protagonist's loneliness and feeling of anguish emanating from his estrangement from the environment, tradition and his true self. He harbours the desire for clarity from the mysteries of this world but he is confronted with darkness and confusion which leads to detachment from self and the world. In other words, conflict arises between his awareness of death and constant desire for life, his detachment transcends barriers of geography, nationality and culture. The novel, assumes the dimensions of an authentic record of the extrinsic indication of the human existence generated by a deep-rooted quest for knowledge and belongingness.

**Index Terms:** Detachment, Involvement, conflict, culture

Born of an English mother and a Kenyan-Indian father, Sindi is a child of mixed parentage. Since both his parents died in an air crash near Cairo, Sindi is brought up by an uncle settled in Kenya. He took his academic education in London, then moved to a nightclub in Soho where he worked as a dishwasher and barman, to Scotland where he worked at a small village library and discussed religion, God and mysticism with a catholic priest, to Boston where he studied for six years and met June and Babu, to Delhi where he ultimately settled down. This fluidity of his background emphasizes his alienation and his being a foreigner from birth. He suffers from a disturbing sense of meaninglessness, which may be apparent.

Initially, Sindi has a purely detached business-like attitude towards life and people. He is totally unaware of the happiness provided by emotional bonds. While engaged in an amorous sport with June, Sindi marks the sudden fall of a spider from the ceiling, and attributes it to his "exploring his inverted universe" (90). This ordinary and almost negligible incident becomes for him a symbol of man's mysterious position in this universe. According to Sindi, life is short lived, unreal and inescapably painful. He broods over his loneliness in the hall of International Students Association which is intended to bring foreigners in contact with the Americans: Except for the bartender and me there wasn't a soul in the room who wasn't dancing or talking or beating his feet to the music. It is remarkable how you can be in a crowded room like that and still feel lonely, like you were sitting in your own tomb. (22)

As a student he grows utterly indifferent as to what he studies and what profession he opts for. The job which he takes in Soho is not for the sake of money but was, "to sort my ideas out" (142) as he says. At London he has had a brilliant academic career. At Boston, he takes a doctorate in mechanical engineering, but he has no importance for it and he says, "I cared two pins for all the mechanical engineers in the world" (14). From his lectures at Lords, "... he wanted to know the meaning of life" (63). His professor offers him a position in the college faculty but he opts for a job in New York, from where he comes to Delhi. When Mr. Khemka asks him what kind of job he is looking for, he says, "it should be something that would make me forget myself" (14). He feels that one should be able to detach oneself from the object of one's love and this would enable him to meet the challenges of life. Sindi's emotional and mental predicament doesn't permit respect for the society or religion. His life turns a new leaf when he meets June Blyth, a beautiful, affectionate American girl at a foreign student's party in Boston. She is free, frank, uninhibited and generous with a Christ in her heart, craving to be of help to someone. Initially, June helps Sindi in overcoming his illness. Slowly their relationship grows and she likes him and Sindi loves her. She gives a lot of her time to him as "she wanted to be of use to someone" (19). Her love for Sindi is more than sexual gratification. Time and again she requests him to marry her but Sindi is afraid of possessing and being possessed by anybody and marriage means both. Sindi says, "... marriage was more often a lust for possession than anything else. People got married just as they bought new cars. And they gobbled each other up" (60). Sindi tries to identify his life with that of the broken marriages he has closely seen, and he is rather apprehensive about getting into any kind of relationship even though he loves June and the thought of losing her to Babu is very unsettling. He believes that most marriages end up in hatred: "The hand that so lovingly held mine would someday ache to hit me" (63). He doesn't want to get involved with other women so as to merge completely with them and get bound by the institution of marriage in which he doesn't believe. He loves June but does not want to commit, with his belief in 'detachment' he alienates himself from her physically but mentally he can never get her out of his mind. Sindi's withdrawal from life, love and marriage ultimately leads June to Babu.

Sindi's obsession with the ideas of detachment makes him shrink from his responsibility. Sindi wants to move away from his past, to a place where he can continue his experiment with life trying to find the meaning of life. Sindi's sense of detachment turns out to be a mental disaster to him. He confesses, "All along I had acted out of lust and greed and selfishness and he had applauded my wisdom. When I sought only detachment, I had driven a man to his death" (8). He could no longer stay in America and decides to leave the country. To avoid being in Boston Sindi had accepted a job in New York, but he returns when he receives a letter from June, seeking his help as she was four months pregnant with Babu's child and was on the brink of despair and completely at a loss. Unfortunately, when Sindi reaches June's place, he is heartbroken to learn from a neighbour that June died after an abortion. He goes to the river bank and breaks down over the dark water. Here he receives his second insight into the mystery of existence, "Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it" (162). For the next few weeks, he engages himself in the excruciating process of self-examination and self-purification (195). One by one he has lost every one, his parents, his uncle, his lovers, Babu and June, their parents, and finally himself.

Sindi knows that he is responsible for his suffering. Thus, instead of self-pity, he now engages in self-analysis. With June's death Sindi reaches the nadir of his benighted existence. But it is not without a ray of hope. Sindi's alienation is most acutely felt in these sorrowful moments and firmly guided by his characteristic cynicism when he decides to head to India by flipping a coin to find his spiritual home. He must come to grips with the world as well to find his true identity. The "pathlessness" of road to New York reminds Sindi of his own pathlessness. The experience of Boston teaches him the fallacy of his concept of detachment. The Indian part provides him with new insight and a direction to follow as well as an opportunity to commit him selflessly to the world.

In India, Sindi accepts a job as personal assistant to Mr. Khemka, but is not happy with his lifestyle. Here too he finds himself a stranger to both the corrupt rich and the poor exploited labour. Sheila, Babu's sister, is the only person who tries to understand Sindi. She belongs to many worlds at the same time, a daughter, loving sister, a shrewd businesswoman, a friend, and finally a partner to Sindi. In the beginning, she pesters Sindi with questions about her brothers' death and shows him all the letters which Babu had written before his death, but by the end of the novel her attitude softens towards Sindi, she goes to him for help when her father is in jail, and also agrees with Sindi when he tells Mr. Khemka that evading income tax was a dirty thing. She says, "A dirty thing is dirty whether somebody knows about it or not" (178).

Sindi believes that one must accept the responsibility of one's actions as his past experience has taught him that putting the "consequences of my actions on others or presumed to take over their actions as my own had done more harm than good" (175). This is the moment of his self-awakening. His visit to Muthu's home, changes his whole attitude towards life and others. The small fortifications of detachment that Sindi had built around himself all his life are shattered to pieces when the redeeming episode of the crumbling of Khemka's business and the appalled spectacle of the "bundles of soggy humanity" (43) comes to fore. When Sindi says he does not want to get involved, Muthu replies: "But it is not involvement Sir, sometimes detachment is in actually getting involved" (188). Sindi realizes that "Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it" (204). Sindi is so moved by the plight of Muthu and his people that he finally decides to stay back and take it as his moral responsibility to help them. In this context, Mohan Jha remarks: It is the nature of human distress and suffering of which Muthu among others is a living image, that drives him from detachment to involvement, from indifference to participation, from neutrality to commitment, and as Muthu says and Sindi sees, detachment consists in getting involved with the world. (Mohan Jha 168)

With the reorientation of his life, he even changes his name from Sindi to Surrender Oberoi. This self-transcendence is made possible when he recognizes the problems which man fails to see in his ignorant pursuit of worldly pleasures like a truly detached person. Sindi now sees life steadily and as a whole, and smiles at its absurdities. It brings about a moral growth in Sindi. "All the incidents in the novel like, academic success, breach of trust in love and friendship, suicide, death and downfall of Khemka's business contribute to his wisdom" (Pandey 64). He is no more afraid of love, commitment, freedom, growth, change, of the unknown, he becomes himself. This transformation is the result of a deep-seated belief in a metaphysical view of life. As Usha Pathania remarks: In order not to feel utterly isolated which would condemn us to insanity, we need to find a new unity: with our fellow beings and with nature. (Pathania 141)

Thus the novel emphasizes through the travails of Sindi the mysterious and incalculable nature of life. Given his track record, it is a sea change in him as it shows his stubbornness to meet life on his terms. He plunges himself into the battle of survival which the workers of factory could not have won without his help, co-operation and guidance. He finds relief from his agony when he shifts the attachment from the self to the world. The sense of guilt which has oppressed him since Babu committed suicide is erased by this realization that Babu's father is a cheat. The journey from the West to East symbolizes Sindi's spiritual quest. He is constantly aware of the objects of sense and of inexorable law of death that levels everything. It explains to some extent, his reluctance for involvement. This awareness is made more painful by his perception of a reality beyond time and change, a reality characterized by whole-ness, stability and peace.

*The Foreigner* safeguards strong assertions: detachment and meaningful action, conflict with evil and corruption, humanitarianism and love of the people, faith in the process of destiny and a quest for peace, fulfilment and salvation within one's own cultural parameters. Sindi recognizes that involvement with culture, language, and citizenship is a precondition for interpreting the world; at the same time, he endorses the view that involvement imposes a partial perspective on social life which can generate fateful oppositions in social orientation and human relation. He finds freedom as he could identify his roots in India by being able to help and do positive action where he lives and not being detached from it as was the case in America. His scorn is for the kind of life he has lived and for Mr. Khemka and his style of working, but freedom comes to him in India in the form of choices, which he has in transforming the office and looking after the business with the arrest of Mr. Khemka. Sindi's quest ends with the understanding of detachment, integration of his self with self and the world and his approach to life for love and unselfish work.

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