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Mythic Paths to Self-Realisation: A Comparative Study of Hermann Hesse and Arun Joshi

Bhanu Bhasker Prajapati, Sudhir Kumar Arora

ORCID https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1003-9086

First Author: Bhanu Bhasker Prajapati, Assistant Professor of English, Tilak Dhari Post Graduate College Jaunpur, UP, India, bhanubhu111@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Sudhir Kumar Arora, Professor of English, Maharaja Harishchandra PG College, Moradabad, drsudhirkarora@gmail.com

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Abstract

Aims: *The aim of this study is to examine how Hermann Hesse and Arun Joshi employ mythic symbolism to depict the journey toward self-realisation in their selected novels. Drawing a comparative approach, the study aims to identify shared mythic motifs addressing alienation, moral awakening, and the search for wholeness, and to demonstrate the universality of the quest for integrated selfhood in the context of modern existential crises.*

Methodology and Approaches: *The study employs close reading of primary text, articles, research papers, critical books, and web sources. It also utilises critical and comparative methods for analysing different dimensions and paradigms.*

Outcome: *The outcome of this research validates the central argument that mythic paths to self-realisation in Hesse and Joshi converge toward an integrated vision of human existence, where inner harmony, ethical responsibility, and spiritual awareness form the foundation of authentic life.*

Conclusion: *The study concludes that self-realisation transcends cultural boundaries, even as it is shaped by cultural philosophies. Hesse's synthesis of Eastern mysticism and Western psychology and Joshi's fusion of existentialism with Hindu thought affirm that the struggle for wholeness, moral awakening, and meaning is universally human. Their works collectively suggest that mythic paradigms remain profoundly relevant in addressing the psychological, spiritual, and ethical crises of modern life.*

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***Correspondence:** Bhanu Bhasker Prajapati, Sudhir Kumar Arora, bhanubhu111@gmail.com

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Hermann Hesse (1877–1962), a Nobel Prize-winning German-Swiss author, and Arun Joshi (1939–1993), a prominent Indian English writer, grapple with the human condition in an era of rapid modernisation and existential disquiet. Hesse, influenced by psychoanalysis and Eastern philosophies often portrays protagonists on arduous paths to self-realisation, confronting inner divisions through mythic archetypes. Joshi, drawing from Hindu scriptures like the Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads, examines alienation, corruption, and spiritual redemption in post-colonial India. They use allegory and symbolism to critique societal ills while offering paths to inner harmony.

Mythological structures appear cyclical as "Mythological worlds have been built up only to be shattered again and that new worlds were built from the fragments" (Boas 18). In the world of myths, story matters not the way and place from where it comes. Since time immemorial, the human beings have been listening to the story, and it has been our legacy from our ancestors. It goes around the world in different manner and form. But in essence it is same. That is why Boas termed it "a cyclical structure." In line of that self-realization, as conceptualized here, involves transcending fragmented identities, illusions, and dualities to achieve wholeness. People take different paths to reach the same destination that is to realize the self. Mythic symbolism serves as a vehicle for these journeys, allowing abstract spiritual struggles to manifest in narrative forms. This paper analyses selected novels from each author, incorporating thematic connections, and compares their approaches. By doing so, it illuminates how mythic elements facilitate self-realisation across cultural contexts, addressing universal themes of detachment, involvement, and moral awakening. Hermann Hesse explores "Self-Realisation" through mythic symbolism. Hesse's works are steeped in mythological and psychological motifs, portraying self-realisation as a confrontation with the self's darker aspects and a quest for unity. His protagonists often embody archetypal struggles, drawing from Jungian shadows, Eastern mysticism, and Western Romantic ideals.

In *Steppenwolf*, Hesse depicts self-realisation as arising from confronting one's shadow, illusions, and fragmented identity. The protagonist, Harry Haller, perceives himself as a "Steppenwolf"—a lone wolf torn between bourgeois

conformity and wild instincts, symbolising the eternal struggle between polarities within the human psyche. This mythic duality reflects Jung's "process of individuation," where integration of the shadow leads to wholeness. Jung writes, "Individuation" is to denote the process by which a person becomes a psychological "in-dividual," that is, separate, indivisible unity or "whole" (Jung 275). Haller's hallucinations and encounters in the Magic Theatre represent a spiritual and psychological odyssey, using mythic symbolism like the wolf archetype to illustrate the path to self-acceptance. Hesse employs symbols such as the "Treatise on the Steppenwolf" to expose illusions of a binary self, urging Haller to recognise his multiplicity—like souls within a single body. The novel's educational intent, through characters like Hermine (a guide to sensual awakening) underscores enduring life's complexities for self-realisation. Ultimately, Haller's journey culminates in a comic-psychological revelation: self-realisation demands humour and acceptance of chaos, transforming mythic struggle into personal growth. The fragmented identity has been elaborated in the crystal clear manner in the following paragraph:

> So we are, yes. The devil- that is our intellectual faculty, our mind- and we are its unfortunate children. We have fallen away from nature and are now left dangling in the void. But now I'm reminded that in the Steppenwolf tract that I told you about there is a passage explaining that it is only a figment of Harry's imagination when he thinks he possesses two souls or consists of two personalities. Every human being, it says there, is made up of ten, of a hundred, of a thousand souls (Hesse 136).

It shows that Steppenwolf image is of hybrid creature, half human by virtue of his intellectual, spiritual and artistic qualities, half wolf by virtue of his instincts, appetites and urges. It is not just condition of the titular protagonist of the novel but each one of us. Steppenwolf functions symbolically: it represents the duality of human nature- the civilized human versus the instinctual, wild self. This dual structure aligns with spiritual and mythological universal pattern, particularly the animal archetype and the divided self, which are central to Hesse's philosophy. Further, the central character comes across a person who died in a car accident. When he searches the pockets he discovers a leather wallet with visiting cards in

it. Taking one out, he reads on it the words: "Tat tvam asi." It is a Sanskrit saying and its literal meaning is "You are that" where "Tat" (that) is the fundamental principle underlying all cosmic reality. "Tvam" (you) denotes the individual's innermost self. The one who recognizes and sees that the two are identical/same is to achieve salvation or liberation. Here, Hesse presents the glimpse of the teaching of Vedantic Hindu philosophy.

The Glass Bead Game blends mythic, spiritual, and intellectual quests, positing self-realisation as the harmonisation of intellect and spirit. Set in a futuristic utopia, the novel follows Joseph Knecht, who rises to Magister Ludi in Castalia, a province dedicated to the Glass Bead Game—an ultra-aesthetic synthesis of arts, sciences, and philosophies. This game symbolises a mythic quest for universal harmony, where spiritual values across ages are perceived as simultaneously alive. Knecht's journey reflects an intricate bildungsroman, balancing the contemplative life of the mind with active worldly engagement. Mythic elements, such as the 'eutopia' of Castalia and Knecht's defection to the real world, highlight the tension between intellectual isolation and spiritual integration. Self-realisation emerges from recognizing the game's limitations—pure intellect without spirit leads to stagnation—echoing Hesse's call for synthesis in human purpose. In the ninth chapter titled "A Conversation" Joseph Knecht makes a very poignant remark. The scene is of the time when Knecht is conversing with Designori. The paragraph reads as follows:

> "Look," he said. "This landscape of clouds and sky. At first glance you might think that the depths are there where it is darkest; but then you realise that the darkness and softness are only the clouds and that the depths of the universe begin only at the fringes and fjords of this mountain range of - solemn and supreme symbols of clarity and orderliness. The depths and the mysteries of the universe lie not where the clouds and blackness are; the depths are to be found in the spaces of clarity and serenity…." (Hesse 297)

The speech encapsulates Knecht's mature philosophical perspective: a rejection of vague mysticism and obscurity in the favor of clarity, order, and disciplined spiritual insight. It aligns with the ideals of Castalia and the Glass Bead Game

itself. This moment is significant because it focuses the fundamental contrast between romantic darkness and disciplined clarity. This is the epicenter of Hesse's novel and in Knecht's intellectual and spiritual development. In the twelfth chapter titled "The Legend" Knecht reflects about leaving the institution without informing Fritz but he is in doubt. He remembers the lines: "In all beginnings dwells a magic force. For guarding us and helping us to live" (Hesse 351). Through prophecy-like appendices and Knecht's lives, Hesse mythologises the eternal quest for meaning, blending Eastern meditation with Western scholarship. Arun Joshi's Depiction of Self-Realisation in Indian Contexts: Joshi's novels are abundantly influenced by existentialism and Hindu philosophy. His novels use mythic and allegorical elements to address post-independence alienation, portraying self-realisation through selfless action, devotion, and moral redemption. In *The Foreigner*, Joshi explores Karmayoga—the path of selfless action rooted in the Bhagavad Gita—amid existential crisis and the search for meaning. Protagonist Sindi Oberoi, an orphan of mixed heritage, oscillates between detachment and involvement, reflecting Gita's philosophical tension between renunciation and duty. Symbolism, such as cultural clashes and inner turmoil, underscores his alienation and quest for identity. This characteristic of Arun Joshi has been focused in the research paper by Arun Kumar Singh as the yogic paths. He writes: "The development of human spirit in the environment of democracy, the suffering of the wretched soul trapped in the violent universe, and so on, is a typification of common reality rather than of regional or cultural idiosyncrasies" (Singh 2032).

Oberoi's journey from self-delusion to selfless service embodies Karmayoga, where action without attachment leads to redemption. Mythic elements from Hindu philosophy provide resolution, as Oberoi confronts trauma and finds purpose in aiding others, transcending foreignness. This narrative critiques modern detachment while advocating Gita-inspired integration. The study in alienation at once recalls the most gripping mystery of human condition in twentieth century. All are surviving in a precarious situation. "The very title of the novel "*The Foreigner*" reminds one of the epoch making work "*The Outsider*" by Albert Camus" (Dwivedi 26).

They are so materialistic in life style that even they forget the basic tenet of the self, the innermost. In the novel this has been highlighted through transaction imagery and symbol when the main character says: "I suppose one could. But things are just not the same. Life is not a business account, losses of which can be written off against the gains. Once your soul goes bankrupt, no amount of plundering can enrich it again." (Joshi 130). The conversation between Oberoi and June is startling at several instances. The following is one of them:

> In your world everything is illusion, June said. No. Birth and death are real. They are the constants. All else is variable. In the rest you see what you want to see. According to the Hindu mystics there is a reality beyond all this. But I don't know. I would like to know some day. (Joshi 157)

This exchange between June Blyth and Sindi Oberoi crystallises one of the novel's central philosophical conflicts: the tension between detachment and involvement, illusion and reality, and spiritual speculation versus existential uncertainty. June's remark is both and an accusation and an insight. She perceives Sindi's habitual withdrawal from emotional commitment and liver responsibility. To her, his intellectualization of life reduces concrete human relationships- love, suffering, guilt- into abstractions. Thus, his "world" appears unreal, evasive, and insulated from pain. Oberoi's response deepens the metaphysical dimension of the dialogue. By asserting that birth and death alone are real and constant, he echoes a Hindu philosophical worldview, particularly ideas drawn from Vedanta, where phenomenal existence (maya) is transient and deceptive, while ultimate reality (Brahman) lies beyond sensory experience. Everything between birth and death—social roles, desires, successes, failures—are "variables" and shaped by perception: "In the rest you see what you want to see." This suggests that human experience is subjective, constructed by desire, fear, and personal need rather than grounded in stable truth.

However, Joshi complicates this apparent spiritual certainty through Oberoi's final admission: "But I don't know. I would like to know someday." This confession reveals that Oberoi is not a realised mystic, but a seeker suspended between philosophies. His invocation of Hindu mystics is tentative, not authoritative. He longs for transcendental knowledge but lacks experiential

certainty. This unresolved yearning exposes the gap between intellectual acceptance of spiritual ideas and lived realization. The passage, thus, functions on multiple levels. Philosophically, it juxtaposes Eastern metaphysical thought with modern existential doubt. Psychologically, it reveals Oberoi's inner conflict—his desire to escape the pain of attachment while still craving authentic understanding. Thematically, it reinforces Joshi's broader concern with the modern individual's spiritual homelessness, especially the alienation of a culturally displaced protagonist who belongs fully neither to Western materialism nor to Eastern spiritual assurance. In essence, the dialogue underscores that Oberoi's problem is not disbelief, but incompleteness: he senses a deeper reality beyond illusion, yet remains trapped in uncertainty, unable to convert philosophical insight into transformative wisdom. A very good example of Bhakti-yoga can be found in the novel *The Last Labyrinth* as well.

Both Hesse and Joshi employ mythic symbolism to seek self-realization, though Hesse focuses on psychological individuation and Joshi on philosophical yogas. In *Steppenwolf* and The *Foreigner,* shadow confrontation and existential alienation lead to unity—Hesse via Jungian archetypes, Joshi through Karmayoga. *The Glass Bead Game*'s intellectual-spiritual harmony parallels *The City and the River*'s allegorical conflict, using prophecy and synthesis for collective awakening. Narcissus and Goldmund's duality mirrors *The Apprentice*'s redemption arc, blending mind-body with devotion. Cross-culturally, Hesse bridges East-West mysticism, while Joshi roots in Hindu myths, yet both critique alienation and advocate wholeness. Their works suggest mythic paths transcend borders, fostering moral and spiritual integration. Hesse and Joshi illuminate self-realization as a mythic journey toward wholeness, confronting fragmentation through symbolism and philosophy. Their novels offer timeless insights into human struggles, urging harmonisation of opposites for personal and societal renewal. It is hoped that future researches will explore intersections with global existential literature.

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Bhanu Bhasker Prajapati

Bhanu Bhasker Prajapati is Assistant Professor at Tilak Dhari Post Graduate College Jaunpur, and a research scholar at Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Rohilkhand University (MJPRU), Bareilly. He is dedicated to academic excellence and student development and contributes actively to teaching and research. His area of expertise lies in Indian English Literature and British Fiction.

Sudhir K. Arora

Dr. Sudhir K. Arora is currently a Professor of English at Maharaja Harishchandra P. G. College, Moradabad, affiliated to Guru Jambheshwar University, Moradabad, India. He is the author of several significant publications, including the five-volume series: Cultural and Philosophical Reflections in Indian Poetry in English.