

Arun Joshi as an Adept in Effecting a Focus on the Predicament of Modern Man, Especially His Alienated Self in the Contemporary Indian Milieu: An Appraisal

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Abstract- The paper aims at delineating the predicament of modern man, in Arun Joshi's novels. He is one of the supreme novelists, his journey of fictional works is based on the sense of alienation and existential predicament. Arun Joshi has successfully revealed the subtleties and complexities of contemporary Indian milieu through his writings.

Index Terms- Self-alienation, Self-realization, inscrutable, impermanence, discrepancy, rootlessness, social fabric

I. INTRODUCTION

What is commonly held is that fiction transmutes the facts of life. The Novel, as a literary genre, is new to India. Epics, lyrics, dramas, short stories and fables have their more respectable ancestors. There were, of course, isolated marvels like Bana's *Kadambari* and Subandhu's *Vasavadatta*. The development of the Indian novel in English can be traced from its experimental stage to realistic to psychological. The real beginning of the novel was with the work of the great Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), whose first published work *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) was in English. The sad plight of the widow in the Hindu society was to prove a recurrent motif in Indian fiction. Ramesh Chandra Dutt's *The Lake of Palms* (1909) is the study of the social life in Bengal. S.K.Ghosh's *The Prince of Destiny : The New Krishna* (1909) portrays a union of the highest ideals of the East and the West. Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) is a picture of Muslim Life in modern Delhi. Kumara Guru's fictional studies are a mild protest against the Westernization of the soul of India that is now in progress. Kumara Guru's fiction is an extraordinary blend of social criticism and special pleading. Thus, the Indian novel in English has now

become an integral part of Indian reality thereby showing full cognizance of the changing facets of Indian Life.

One of the avowed objectives of Indo-Anglian writers of fiction is the creative interpretations of scenes and situations, men and matters in India. Every culture has its own image, consequently the artistic endeavour to project it has its positive value. Culture is reflected in the modes of life of people, their thought processes, their innermost urges and longings, their fulfillments and frustrations. It signified certain innate compulsions peculiar to the way of life of a community. Certain modes and ways of feeling became characteristic of the psyche of a people and formed part of their cultural pattern. These cultural patterns developed through a process of individualities and enabled the people to evolve their identity. Writers wished to give an individualistic expression to those urges which issued from their cultural consciousness. Though human experience was universal, it grew out of a specific, unified, homogeneous cultural pattern. Indian writers in English were, thus, invariably involved in formulating and projecting the Indian image.

The Indian novel in English gained its form, content and respectability at the hands of "The Big Three" of the Indo-Anglian fiction namely Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao. Anand's novels are poems of suffering portraying impassionately the inequality, poverty and exploitation of characters who were real individuals, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometimes weak and thoroughly Indian. R.K.Narayan, the most prolific among the three, did not leave any field out of his novels and they were as varied as business, education, money-lending, journalism, sweet making and painting. The

typical protagonist of R.K.Narayan began as a fallen angel and came through the quest of truth, evolving gradually the necessary vision. Raja Rao's works were marked by his philosophy, intricate reflections on life and spirituality. Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* emerged as a richly ambiguous novel where varied layers of experience sublimated into a vision of life. The novel was considered as a potent response to the promise or threat of cultural collision. The great masters were followed by a host of such punishment writers as Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Khushwant Singh. These novelists not only enriched the fictional world with their contributions but also gave stability and prestige to the Indo-Anglian fiction. Referring to the fiction of recent writers, K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar commented thus: "They have given ample evidence of vitality, variety, humanity and artistic integrity" (P 518).

The arrival of Nayantara Saghla, Anita Desai and Arun Joshi marked a new phase in the Indo-Anglian fiction. The Indian novels in English seemed to move away from the traditional fields and caught up with the modern western novels. The camera eye of the novelist now got shifted from the outer world to the inner recesses of the mind and heart. Arun Joshi, one of the modern Indian novelists in English in surge of new themes had "renounced the larger world in favour of the inner man by engaging himself in a surge for the essence of human living" (P 124). The post-independent writers like Anita Desai and Arun Joshi focused their attention for the first time on the inner psyche of men and women. The emphasis has certainly shifted from the socio-political environments to the minds of the characters. It is possible to trace existential tendencies in these novelists. Existentialism is an anti-intellectual philosophy of life holding that man is free and responsible. According to Ruby Chatterji, existentialist literature tended to emphasize the following recurring themes:

"Man alienated from an absurd world;
the individual estranged from society;
the individual's isolation and subjectivity,
his guilt, his struggles to distinguish
between inauthentic and authentic selves;
his assertion of personal freedom through
irrevocable choice, particularly in extreme

situations, limit situations and crisis situations; death consciousness and the need to defend oneself against it; the victim hero who creates his own values from within" (P 81).

Arun Joshi could be considered as a pioneer of sort who dared to experiment with a foreign philosophy in the Indian context. As an outstanding novelist of human predicament, Joshi brought out four novels so far. 1. *The Foreigner* (1968), 2. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, (1971), 3. *The Apprentice* (1974) and 4. *The Last Labyrinth* (1980). These novels form a sort of "corporate cluster" and they are "quest quarters" (Prasad 25). The very first novel *The Foreigner* evoked the central theme of a foreigner, a man without roots, suffering from loneliness, anxiety and alienation. The subsequent novels were in fact, extensions of the previous themes. The focus of Arun Joshi was on the predicament of modern man in contemporary Indian milieu.

Born in 1939, Arun Joshi had a brilliant academic career. He obtained an Engineering degree from the University of Kansas and a degree of Industrial Management from M.I.T, Cambridge, Massachusetts. For a brief period in 1957, he worked at a mental hospital in the United States. After returning to India in 1962, he joined D.C.M. in a managerial capacity on the recruitment and training side. Joshi came from an enlightened family. His father, an eminent botanist, was Vice-Chancellor of Punjab University and later of Benares Hindu University. He got married in 1964 and had three children, two girls and one boy. His wife Rukmani, an entrepreneur herself, has a respect for writers and understands them" (Mathai 8).

As known to me and all, in the modern age, man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but also from an inner problem, a conviction of isolation, randomness and meaninglessness in his way of existence. Even the great genius is necessarily moulded by culture, ideals, mental and moral tendencies of the society into which the writer is born and the character of what he produces is therefore to a larger extent determined by these. In this sense, one has to regard every writer as a product of his time. Arun Joshi, influenced by the problem of the self, deals with the theme of alienation in his fictional world. No doubt, Arun Joshi is good at bringing out in all his novels the inner crisis of modern man. A

certain awareness of man's rootlessness and the consequential loneliness and anxiety is the key note of Joshi's unique vision of the predicament of modern man in contemporary Indo-English fiction. Quite honestly speaking, Arun Joshi has tried to present in his novels solutions to problems arising out of one's awareness of the purpose of meaning of life. The source of Joshi's novels is nothing but actual life – experience' and he feels a need to shape his experiences and a need to discover the reality which lies hidden in the actuality of his own life.

Arun Joshi is an adept in realizing man's uniqueness and loneliness in an indifferent and inscrutable universe. Joshi's protagonists are singularly individualistic and completely self-centred. Though highly educated, some of them having studied abroad, their behaviour is in compatible with the natural laws of everyday reality. They violate norms of social life and indulge in actions which are instinctive and irrational. Quite alienated from the sinister, materialistic life around them, they try to work out their destiny in their own way. Arun Joshi's characters, though successful in freeing themselves from the restraints of their external environment, do remain subjected to the urges of their sub-conscious self. This existential state of disappointment, isolation and meaninglessness has received adequate attention in the novels of Arun Joshi.

In his very first novel namely *The Foreigner*, Arun Joshi does explore the individual's anguished consciousness of being isolated from the whole apparatus of social convention and ritual. This novel may be considered as a literary representation of rootlessness or an artistic triumph that unifies feelings and ideas, characters and events. It may also be interpreted as a satire on man's exploitation by man in free India, on the corruptions corroding our social fabric, on population explosion and one-crowding in India admits poverty and disease, and on the denial of rights to people in spite of our declared democratic rights. At a deeper level, *The Foreigner*, can be viewed as an attempt to plumb man's perennial dilemmas. The discrepancy between the individual's pursuits and the extent to which he is able to reach them is the central point of the novel. Though Joshi exposes the constraints of society on individuals, he is unable to come out with a definite solution to wake up men from the slumber caused by identity crisis. In the words of R.S.Pathak, "one may

establish a tenuous relation among different solutions put forth by him but there is no progression of thought from novel to novel" (P 62).

Reading *The Foreigner* is not a smooth experience. Instead, to read this novel is to be emotionally disturbed. The hero of the novel, Sindi Oberi, like the other heroes of Joshi, is a lonely misfit in the world in which he has to exist and face the meaningless of existence. Though he is not religious or saintly, he is human enough to learn lessons taught to him by life's problems. In *The Foreigner*, Joshi makes use of terms and concepts which evoke typically Indian philosophical thoughts in one's mind. For instance, Sindi remarks:

"All love – whether of things, persons or oneself – is an illusion and all pain springs from that Birth and death are constants. The wheel of karma, like the wheel of Industrialization never steps ... to concentrate on the decisive action. The fruit of it was not my concern" (P43)

The novelist is keen on showing how the material wealth in a given society is the only yardstick to measure the happiness of individuals. The hero is an atmosphere bereft of meaning. The past and the future make no difference to the hero. To him, the future would be as meaningless as the past. The very title of the novel implies that human beings are foreigners wherever they are on the face of the earth. Sindi is an orphan both in terms of relationships and emotional roots. In fact, he does not even know that one had to have a sense of belongingness. "It had never struck me that one had to belong" (P 48). Sindi feels alien in the affluent west represented by America and London as well as in the poverty – stricken past represented by India and Kenya. To make the hero universal, Joshi makes a novel out of a wide variety of scenes. During the course of the novel, he takes us to Nairobi where Sindi is born; to London and Boston where he studies; to a night club in Soho where he works as a dishwasher and barman; to Scotland where he discusses religion and to Delhi where he ultimately settles down. Alienated from the sinister, materialistic life around him, Sindi tries to work out his destiny in his own way. Lying in his bed, Sindi wanders in what way he belongs to the world that roars beneath his apartment window. Someone has begotten him without a purpose and his

only purpose in life is in search for peace. He is a foreigner in Kenya, London, America and India. Sindi laments thus:

“My Foreigners lay within me and
I could not leave myself behind wherever
I want” (TF 65).

One is reminded her of Milton’s Satan. Sindi tells Khema:

“I have no roots.
I have no system of morality” (P 143).

The consciousness of himself being a rootless alien drives Sindi into a cloistered refuge of self-alienation and drives him from crisis to crisis. Sindi feels lonely in a crowded room, rendering it difficult for him to involve himself in association with other people. He looks upon himself as a lonely traveler. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, the theme of alienation is kept in the background. But in *The Foreigner*, the novelist repeatedly emphasizes that man is alone and his prime source of inner turmoil is ‘rootlessness’. Almost all the characters in the novel suffer from a sense of alienation. The hero Sindi, of course, is the crown prince of the world of alienated individuals.

His search for the purpose of existence is so fruitlessness that he is forced to remark:

“Good things and bad things appear to be the same in the long run of existence” (114).

He goes to the extent of deriving joy out of his misery. “But it is good to be reminded once in a while how miserable one is” (34). He is totally aware of his misery but he can do little to comfort himself. Alienation envelops the hero totally. His rare trait is that while the others feel alienated once in a way, he forgets it once in a way. When he is with people, he understands that there is a temporary bond of love. “We knew I wouldn’t last long, but the short while I was on that beach, I forget my strangeness, my loneliness, even my search for detachment” (P 79) is the pathetic observation of Sindi. He is cynical, exhausted and grown old before his time, weary with his loneliness. Even birthdays depress him. Probably Sindi’s entire view of life and its responses were coloured by his childhood deprivation of love from his parents. Therefore, he entertains a deep sense of

unreality and impermanence, about things. He sits in a bar and watches the crowd move up and down in a huge mirror behind the bar. All those faces distorted in the cheap mirror make him feel even more like an alien. The novelist Joshi repeatedly emphasizes the fact that Sindi’s predicament is universal:

“That is the loneliness of our times, I thought as I rode up the elevator.
Strangers promise to see you without even knowing your name. you are a king in a deck of kings, shuffled and reshuffled, meeting fifty-one similar kings, never anything sensible, never enchanting anything sensible, never exchanging names” (The Foreigner, 197).

Sindi’s attitude towards love and marriage is based on his sense of total alienation. He brushes aside June’s proposal for marriage with the declaration that people like him are not cut out for marriage. Begetting children and thereby claiming to have made a contribution to society are all twiddle – twaddle as all end in death. During the first experience of love – making with June, he feels himself to be no more than a log lying beside her, embraced by the smell of drugs and sweet. June too does not understand him properly. Sindi knows that he is not the right kind of person one could love. But for June it takes almost a year to find it out. Nothing seems to be real and nothing seems to be very important. But Sindi is unable to reason it out: “Can one ever explain one’s beliefs”? (P 111). Sindi goes to the extent of advising Babu not to fall in love in America since it does nobody any good. These words are symptomatic of Sindi’s defective attitude towards life. First of all, Sindi does not love himself sufficiently well to love others. He cannot love himself because he suffers from a self-defeating sense of insecurity. His defenses not only disallow him to love others but also to be loved by others. Sindi’s views on marriage is a clever cover for him to shy away from involvement, commitment and action:

“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” (TF 71).

He sounds practical, hiding his ability to get involved:

“You can’t send two persons through a ceremony and expect that their aloneness will disappear” (133).

Irrespective of what Sindi does not where he is, Sindi is conscious of his loneliness. Sindhi’s view of the emptiness of human existence leads him to the employment of the death image as a recurrent motif. It has thematic relevance, implying the death wish of the protagonist, which denotes that he leads a death-in-life existence. Even the ordinary daily things remind Sindi of his loneliness. Arun Joshi shifts the scene from America to India. But West or East, human beings are the same and consequently, human condition too is the same. Sindhi wants to leave America to escape a hit of himself that appeared the most decayed. Nigeria or India is the choice and the flip of the coin decides in farm of India. He comes to India hoping that it will provide him with a place of anchor on this lonely planet but his hopes are belied. He finds India no better than America. He feels himself a misfit in the ultra-modern society of Boston. But his foreign background makes him a misfit in the Indian society also. In truth, it had been a change of theatre from America; the show remains unchanged. He faces here a different set of people with a different set of varieties with different ways of squeezing happiness” (220). The feeling of loneliness continues to haunt Sindi in India also. In “The Foreigner: A Critique of the East and West”, Arun Joshi has said:

“A strange feeling of aloneness and aloofness permeates the entire narrative and provides the necessary texture and structure of the novel” (PP 13-14).

The trait of the alienated individual is that he neither establishes enduring relationship nor totally breaks away from the others. Sheila summarizes the essence of *The Foreigner* when she tells Sindi:

“you are the saddest men I have ever known” (146) Arun Joshi has successfully explored the individuals anguished consciousness of being isolated from the whole apparatus of social convention and ritual. From *The Foreigner* to *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is a movement from the almost contemplative

world of Sindhi to the dynamic, vital and active world of Billy. It presents “a protagonist alienated from the higher middle class society in which he is compelled to live though he finds in himself an overpowering urge to march to a different drum altogether” (Naik 230). In this novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, the narrator encounters a mystic underworld. Any intrusion of civilization meets its own catastrophe. Billy’s master in his father, who believes in law and engineering, who has a sense of belonging to the universe based on control and rule. This invades Billy’s freedom and humanity.

Billy’s quest is deeper than Sindi Oberai’s. It is not a quest for anchor; it is a quest for self-realization. Within him it is a great attempt of man to find himself. Among the Bhils, he feels released, free and finds a certain sense of divinely in human life. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* brings out the anxiety, restlessness and isolation suffered by the protagonist, who is alienated from his own self. He is portrayed as a frustrated man, sailing about in a confused society, a society, without norms, without direction, without even a purpose. It is a tale of a conscience- torn man with a curious mixture of idealism and docility, a vague sense of values, a helpless self-deceptive effort to flout them with a deep awareness of the conflicts between life and living. The sadness of the tale lies in the inevitable action of such young men like Billy into the whirlpool that the society is. The narrator moves from a state of innocence to a state of experience. The novel is a tale told with excellent craftsmanship, maintaining the contrast between the impulsive and seemingly eccentric behaviour and actions of Billy and the cool, collected account of Romi Sahai, the collector friend of Billy. Billy, the hero of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is an adventurer who tries to know as to why there is a constant blurring of reality in existence. The novel is, no doubt, a study of the total alienation of its hero Billy from the modern bourgeois society of India.

The Last Labyrinth is also a novel mainly concerned with the revelation of Som Bhaskar’s efforts at self-realization. His alienation, his attempts to pursue his path towards spiritual realization and his futile effort to establish a permanent relationship of love and sex with Anuradha provide the elements out of which Arun Joshi has built up the thematic structure of the novel. Som’s alienation seems to stem from the inadequacy of his soul. K.R.S. Iyengar has aptly

clubbed all the four protagonists of Arun Joshi in their 'foreignness':

"Joshi's heroes – Sindi Oberai, Billy Biswas, Ratan Rathor, Som Bhaskar – all all 'outsiders' and 'foreigners' after a fashion, Making desperate, if also more or less futile attempts to silence the insidious bug within and research rapport with the world . one tries to flee "himself another his house and class, a third his shameful past and the fourth the furies within" (P 39).

Right from the beginning, Som realizes that he has become a nuisance and that he has been fooling around like a clown performing before a looking glass. He is constantly tormented by a great roaring hollowness inside his soul. Som's efforts to forge an eternal relationship with Anuratha is yet another manifestation of his empty soul. In the labyrinthine always of modern life, most man, irrespective of their social status get lost. The tragedy of existence of men is not that they get lost in these alleys but that they either do not find a way not or are incapacitated by modern civilization from finding a way out. The novelist creates an apt atmosphere in this novel, thereby projecting the problem of meaninglessness as an intense one. All the heroes of Joshi progress from alienation to existential affirmation. But *The Last Labyrinth* is an exception, confirms Joshi:

"... alienation of the heroes of my novels which I have written so far ultimately leads them back to community" (Dhawan 49).

The novelist has concluded that alienation is a cancer which cannot be cured. In *The Last Labyrinth*, Joshi realizes man's uniqueness and loneliness in an indifferent and inscrutable universe and he recognizes a reality beyond the phenomenal world, a reality which the artist could imagine and capture by giving a consistent form to the shapeless facts of human existence. The source of most of Joshi's novels is 'actual experience' and nothing else.

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