

Contemporary relevance and socio-cultural significance in the novels of Arun Joshi

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Abstract

Arun Joshi's fiction conforms to Conrad's conception of the novel. Joshi recognizes a reality beyond the mere 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 novel is actual experience. Joshi does not write fiction according to a formula, rather he grapples with the moments of acute situations in human life. Arun Joshi's novels demonstrate the kind of society in which the characters live and pursue their ambition. The narratives are punctuated with words like "sham", "bogus", "fake" and other similar words.

Keywords: contemporary, novels, Arun Joshi, relevance, significance

Introduction

Arun Joshi is one of the very few Indian novelists in English who have successfully revealed subtleties and complexities of contemporary Indian life. He has produced very compelling works of fiction. Sensitively, alive to the predicament of modern man, Joshi has ably delineated unfortunate consequences of the absence of values and faith in life. In fact, he has been rarely excelled in exemplifying the existential dilemma of the present day world. The most besetting problem that man faces today is the problem of meaninglessness. As Edmund Fuller remarks in our age: "man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problem... a conviction of isolation, randomness, [and] meaninglessness in his way of existence."^[1]

Arun Joshi's theme have contemporary relevance and socio cultural significance. *The Apprentice*, for example is a creative comment on the crisis of character with which we have been familiar for a long time. But what we should not forget in reading the novel is its claim to be considered a novel, not a sociological study of the roots and causes of corruption. This observation applies with equal force to the other novels as well. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is not about the manners and customs of the primitive tribes in Jhansi District but about Billy's sensitive response to certain psychic phenomena and his wholehearted pursuit. They feel that

Billy had probably done something undesirable on a momentary impulse (I think she had something sexual in mind), something even more degrading than his affair with Reema Kaul, and did not have the courage to face his family. He might even have done it under stress. All along he had wanted to go back to them but was not sure how he would be received^[2].

The narrator and the reader know the psychic compulsion behind the leap of Biswas into an unknown and nebulous terrain. Explaining to the narrator the peculiar situation, Billy says that it was as though a master mind had arranged the whole thing to give me a preview of what awaited me if I continued to defy its call. Poor Rima had crystallized for me the alternatives, although I did not realize this until I sat outside my tent that fateful night. I had two clear choices: I could either follow this call, this vision, whatever the cost, or be condemned to total decay. I suppose most men are faced with similar questions

sometime or the other. The choice to make a leap so that the self may be retrieved from decay is brilliantly exemplified in Anuradha in *The Last Labyrinth*, when she takes the painful decision of snapping her links with Som Bhaskar so that he may live. These crucial decisions may plunge the self into an unknown terrain where the self, the family and society acquire new meaning. The new meaning emerges as a therapeutic process, a sort of cleansing. The self becomes an apprentice to itself, so that it may explore the labyrinth which is itself. As Ratan Rathor frankly confesses that there is another thing that my father used to say, whatever you do touches someone somewhere. In fine, Arun Joshi's novels dramatize the truth embodied in Rathor's confession by forging an aesthetic pattern in which we come across dreams, stories, characters experiencing hallucinations, and visions verbalized and reconstructed. It is the story of a young man who out of sheer exhaustion of joblessness and privation is forced to shed the honesty and the old world morality of his father to become an "apprentice" to the corrupt civilization. One is alienated in this phony world unless one accepts and adjusts to "the guilt" of the modern society in order to belong. Thinkers like Aldous Huxley have aptly pointed out that "ours is a world in which knowledge accumulates and wisdom decays."^[3]

Ratan Rathor, the protagonist of the novel, after his initial hesitation yields completely to the corruption of the modern society and thrives on it. It takes almost a lifetime to reject the "petrified and frozen" world of civilization for he is the child of a double inheritance, the patriotic and courageous world of his father and the worldly wisdom of his mother. The modern man's problems have been discussed variously. But, as Erich Fromm points out: "In the nineteenth century the problem is that man is dead. The danger of the past was that men became slaves. The danger of the future is that men become robots, who will destroy their world and themselves because they cannot stand... a meaningless life."^[4]

It was not patriotism but money that brought respect and bought security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws but money was law unto itself. Modern man may both try and adjust to the "others", to society, to the system, abdicating his true self, or he may strive to keep and develop his individuality and thus alienate himself from

society. We find both these types of alienation in Ratan Rathor. Ratan begins his life with high ambitions and ideals to be honest, true to his self and like his father, make a mark in the world. But he finds himself a misfit in the modern world. He had to abdicate his true self to fit in the corrupt society and make out a living. He is alienated from his true self in the process. The present century has seen the dissolution of old certainties and dogmas and, as Paul Brunton observes: "Never before were so many people plunged in so much uncertainty, so much perplexity and unsettlement."^[5]

While Sindi in *The Foreigner* depends on his philosophy of non-involvement, Ratan in *The Apprentice* holds on to his careerism. Sindi slowly learns that real detachment lies in involvement. In the same manner, Ratan's sense of alienation makes him understand that a combination of humanism and religion can be the saving grace of mankind steeped in corruption.

It has been argued that the novel commends the value of humanity and self-purification. In this sense the novel is a study of the loss and the retrieval of one's soul. The cause of alienation and inner emptiness of Ratan is neither the rootlessness of Sindi nor the unusual urge of Billy. The compelling force of civilized society shatters the idealism of the young like Ratan and compels them to turn cynical and even hypocritical.

According to Srinath, *The Apprentice*:

Is the tale of conscience-torn man with a curious mixture of idealism and docility, a vague sense of values, a helpless self-deceptive effort to flout them for the sake of a career-in short, with a deep awareness of the conflict between life and living^[6].

One may unmistakably find in *The Apprentice* the impact of Camus's *The Fall*. Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a successful Paris barrister in *The Fall*, appeared to himself and to others as the very epitome of good citizenship and decent behavior in the beginning. But suddenly he sees through the deep seated hypocrisy of his existence to the condescension which motivates his action. He turns to debauchery, and finally settles in the fog-bound wilderness of Amsterdam where, as a self-styled "judge penitent", he describes his fall to a chance acquaintance. The monologue in *The Apprentice* as in *The Fall* holds a disquieting mirror to modern morality.

The realization by the young is possible only when they have integrity. This integrity is tested in the fires of existential choice. "Man," says Paul Tillich, "is drawn into the world of objects and has lost or is continuously losing."^[7] Ratan has lost self and felt the anguish of loss. His existential decision to recover the lost self through an act of pertinence reveals the need to realize and prize one's integrity.

Conclusion

Certain recent Indian novelists in English have made significant efforts to delineate the predicament of the modern man. The work of Arun Joshi in particular reads like the spiritual moorings. Despite some differences in approach, all of Joshi's heroes are "men engaged in the meaning of life".^[8] The novelist has tried to project through their experiences the crisis of the urbanized and highly industrialized modern civilization along with its dehumanizing impact on the individual who is ever eager to find out and reaffirm the value of meaningful relatedness in life.

The whole business of living in a muddle confuses the protagonists in Arun Joshi's novels and they fail to differentiate between right and wrong.

The feeling generated in me a great confusion. What had I done, what had I done which I should have not done?^[9] His novels raise some pertinent questions about life and its meaning, social circumstances and tries to unravel the still unsolved mysteries of God and Death.

References

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