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**SUSHMA
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
KURUKSHETRA**

PREDICAMENT OF MODERN MAN IN THE WORKS OF ARUN JOSHI

Abstract

Arun Joshi is one of the very few Indian novelists in English who has successfully revealed subtleties and complexities of contemporary Indian life. He has produced very compelling work of fiction. This paper aims at delineating the predicament of modern man in Arun Joshi's novels *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), and *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) Through his works, Joshi has tried to project the crisis of the urbanized and highly industrialized modern civilization with its dehumanizing impact on the individual. Arun Joshi had been greatly influenced by existentialist writers like Albert Camus, Sartre, and Kierkegaard. Being a great artist of psychological insight, Joshi delves deep into the inner recesses of human psyche. Arun Joshi gave a new direction and dimension to the Indian English novel. His novels delineate the spiritual agony of his lonely questers. Life's meaning, according to Joshi, lies not in the glossy surfaces of pretensions but in the dark mossy labyrinths of the soul.

Arun Joshi gave a new direction and dimension to the Indian English novel. Being a great artist of psychological insight, Joshi delves deep into the inner recesses of human psyche where he finds instincts and impulses at work; he seeks a process of apprehending reality which may lead him to the world of the core of the truth of man's life. He experiments with the medium of literature for studying man's predicament as Joshi remarks :

My novels are essentially an attempt towards a better understanding of the world and of myself.... If I did not write, I imagine I would use other medium to carry on my exploration. (qtd. in Dhawan 8)

Arun Joshi had been greatly influenced by existentialist writers like Albert Camus, Sartre, and Kierkegaard. Mahatma Gandhi and *Bhagwad Gita* were other influences on his writing. He had great faith in Hinduism as he believed that it is highly existentialist – oriented philosophy since it attaches so much value to the right way to live. He 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. In his search for new themes he has "renounced the larger world in favour of the inner man" (Verghese 125) and has engaged himself in "a search for the essence of human living" (Verghese 125). An outstanding novelist of human predicament, Joshi has chartered in all his four novels the inner crisis of the modern man. This paper aims at delineating the predicament of modern man in Arun Joshi's novels *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974) and *The Last Labyrinth* (1981).

The works of Arun Joshi in particular read like the spiritual odyssey of the twentieth century modern man who has lost his spiritual moorings. Despite some differences in their approach, all of Joshi's heroes are "men engaged in the meaning of life." (Jain 52). The novelist has tried to project the crisis of the urbanized and highly industrialized modern civilization along with its dehumanizing impact on the individual. The twentieth century, especially the post war period, has been an age of great spiritual stress and strain and has rightly been regarded 'The Age of Alienation'. Our very notion of reality has been profoundly changed by Bergson's theory of *duree*, Freud's postulates about the subconscious, Einstein's concept of relativity. We suffer from a growing sense of meaninglessness which is manifested in "the alienation from oneself, from one's fellow men and from nature; the awareness that life runs out of one's hand like sand that one will die without having lived; that one lives in the midst of plenty and joyless" (Fromm 86).

Arun Joshi's first novel *The Foreigner* (1968) explores in depth the problem of Sindi Oberoi. He always considered himself as a foreigner because he thinks that he belongs to no country, no people and regards himself as an uprooted young man living in the later half of the twentieth century. As he himself confides, his foreigners lies "within" him and drives him from crisis to crisis to rendering it difficult for him to leave "himself" behind wherever he goes (Joshi 61). Right from the beginning, he is oppressed by a desire to find the meaning of life. He himself wants "to do something meaningful" (Joshi 14).

Sindi's entire life is geared around his quest for permanence in life. He is critical of the ultra-modern, mechanized society in which he is considered quite a misfit. Explaining his stangeness, he tells Mr. Khemeka :

My set of experiences has taught me a reality that is different from yours.... you had a clear-cut system of morality, a caste system that laid down all you had to do. You had a God; you had roots in the soil you lived upon. Look at me. I have no roots. I have no system of morality. (Joshi 135-136)

It is lack of definite frame of reference and a system of values that is responsible for Sindi's problem. His existential drifting over the surface of the earth and his experimentation with self (Joshi 175) only intensify his dismal loneliness and acute sense of meaninglessness of life. He tries to seek, finally, in detachment a solution to his problem. *The Foreigner* relates how Sindi Oberoi, an immigrant Indian, suffers in the course of his search for meaning and purpose of his life. Sindi's alienation from the world is similar to the one that many existentialist heroes in the west suffer from. The novel is an enactment of the crisis of the present in the story

of Sindi Oberoi. Like Camus's *The Outsider*, Sindi is spiritually sterile as he is devoid of any religion and faith. He believes that "there is no end to suffering, no end to struggle between good and evil" (Joshi 43).

Joshi's another novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* also aims at delineating the human predicament. "Billy like Sindi, is in search of a human world of emotional fullness – "a World of meaningful relatedness" (Jain 54). Billy is aware of the deeper layers of his personality and feels totally alienated from the superficial reality of life. The novel probes into his "dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun" (Joshi 8). Here in this civilized world he feels like a fish out of water and sees no other way out but to fly from the civilized, sophisticated modern society. He makes a trip to the tribal wilderness – "the vast emptiness of central India" (Joshi 19) and vanishes into the saal forests of the Malkala. His departure is for him a prelude to an arduous quest for something beyond himself. It is not an escape from *life* and its realities but an escape *into* what he considers to be the "real" life, far from the madding crowd and the sordid, meaningless existence in the civilized world. It is in the primitive tribal life that he finds his own fulfillment and the essence of human existence.

Billy never feels at home in the sophisticated world. He finds something basically wrong with it because it is "hung on this peg of money" (Joshi 97). He often wonders "whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending of money" (Joshi 96). He is terribly unhappy when he finds himself "tied up in a knot by a stifling system of expectations of this mundane world" (Joshi 127).

Billy is thus "a refuge from civilization" (Joshi 140). His search for meaning however is conducted in a very hostile atmosphere and he has to pay a heavy price for it. The sophisticated society, in its "middle class mediocrity" makes it a point to bracket man like him with "irresponsible fools and criminals" (Joshi 231-232) and does all that's possible to prevent them from "seeking such meager fulfillment of their destiny as their tortured lives allowed" (Joshi 231-32). He pays with his life for not conforming to the norms of the urban, civilization and for daring "to step out of its stifling confines" and as the novelist concludes, Billy's tragic death becomes the more tragic when we concentrate on what he said prior to his death. He opened his fast-glazing eyes for a moment looking at Romi and said "you bastards" (Joshi 233) and dies. This is his final verdict on the so called civilized society which is 'bastardly'. What reaches the civilized society is not his message for which he had even sacrificed himself but a handful of ash in pot. Thus Billy's strange case is "disposed of in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers, its true lovers" (Joshi 240)

The Apprentice (1974) also depicts the plight of the contemporary man, who is "sailing about in a confused society without norms, without direction and without even perhaps a purpose" (Joshi 74). The protagonist, Ratan Rathor, is a child of double inheritance. His father was patriotic and courageous but his mother was endowed with worldly wisdom. Torn by these two conflicting philosophies of life, Ratan finds it extremely difficult from the very beginning to live smoothly in the "petrified and frozen" world of civilization. He naturally faces tension and

resentment precisely because he has to put up with totally divergent social norms and expectations. He feels crushed under the growing weight of meaninglessness and isolation.

Ratan's dilemma is typical of an average product of the highly sophisticated civilization. With a troubled conscience Ratan goes from place to place without finding any peace or solace. He confesses –

That is a terrible sensation.... the realization that one's life has been a total waste, a great mistake without purpose, without results. There are many sorrows in the world, but there is nothing in the three world to match the sorrow of a wasted life. (Joshi 140)

Ratan is keen on finding out the purpose of life and all its activities. But he takes almost a life time to free himself from the shackles of the valueless urban civilization. He tries to restore his mental peace by undergoing, finally the most difficult penance in the world– every morning on his way to the office, he wipes outside the temple the shoes of the congregation.

The Last Labyrinth (1981) Sahitya Academy Award Winner novel probes into the turbulent inner world of an industrialist, Som Bhaskar. The novel raises some pertinent questions about life and its meaning and tries to unravel the still unresolved mysteries of God and death. Amidst intriguing juxtapositions, the novel plunges into a haunting world of life, love, God, and Death the greatest of all mysteries – "the last labyrinth". The protagonist Som has "become a nuisance" and that he has been fooling around "like a clown performing before a looking glass" (Joshi 10). He is constantly tormented by a great roaring hollowness inside his soul and the boredom and the fed-upness resulting from his variegated experiences. He once said to Anuradha :

I'll tell you what is wrong.... I am dislocated. My mind is out of focus. There is something sitting right in front of me and I can't see it. (Joshi 107)

He feels as though struck by thunder, he bled totally of all energy, and that inside him "there was nothing but an empty roaring, like the roar of the sea in a conch" (Joshi 115). Som is constantly tormented by terrible loneliness. Later he becomes even more convinced that life is full of complications – "a labyrinth with the labyrinth" (Joshi 29). like the lanes of Benaras. He calls life "vanity of vanities" (Joshi 32). As a consequence of his grim experiences in life, Som develops "a new loathing for the squalid world" (Joshi 46). He is disgusted with the people and himself. He maintains :

It is the voids of the world, more than its objects, that bother me. The voids and the empty spaces, within and without. (Joshi 47)

He begins, ultimately, to nurture self pity and like one who had been completely vanquished by life, utters the terrible death wish– "A peaceful death – that's all he wants, for he is mercilessly torn apart by his doubts" (Joshi 164). He is eaten by his own "strange mad thoughts" (Joshi 223). and is incapable of paying adequate heed to the world and its normal demands. Finally, when he tries to kill

himself, he is stopped by Geeta, who shakes him "gently as though rousing a man from sleep" (Joshi 224). We are given to believe that the unquestioning trust of his intelligence and understanding will restore peace to his life.

To wind up the discussion, it can be said that, all works of Joshi are concerned with the predicament of modern man and his attempt to understand the labyrinths of life. Joshi's protagonists be it Sindi Oberoi or Billy Biswas or Ratan or Som Bhaskar, all are in search of a way to face with dignity the life which is ugly, inescapably painful, and always unsatisfying. Ultimately, however, they are able to arrive at some form of personal affirmation.

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