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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INNOVATIVE RESEARCH & STUDIES

Quest For Identity In The Novel Of Arun Joshi: The Foreigner

ISSN 2319-9725

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Abstract: Arun Joshi deals with various fictional themes as alienation and involvement, east-west encounter and compromise, existentialism and materialism, and quest and complacency. In his novels, he delineates the spiritual agony of his lonely questers. They are absolutely puzzled fellows restlessly searching for their roots and trying to know the purpose of their existence on this planet.

A deep study of the novel of Arun Joshi that is *The Foreigner*, reveal that the central experience of his fiction is crisis and quest his leit motif. Dealing with Sindi Oberoi's journey from detachment from the world to his involvement in it in *The Foreigner*, the novelist depicts Sindi's anguish resulting from his loneliness and his so-called rootlessness. Sindi is a born foreigner who is trying to detach himself from the world. He makes relationship with a number of women but with June he is brought face to face with his hypocrisy, cowardice, vanity and stupidity. The deaths of June and Babu deepen his sense of alienation, but they also act as a peripetia. He comes to India in search of his identity. Throughout his quest for self realization Sindi experiences pains and finally he feels his soul to be coming out renewed and purified. He comes to know the purpose of his existence on this planet. He realizes the real meaning of the detachment theory as depicted in *The Gita* that detachment means not renunciation but selfless action. The novel, in its final implication is a bitter indictment of both- Sindi's alienation and his distorted concept of detachment.

Keywords: alienation, complacency, leit motif, peripetia, renunciation

1. Introduction:

Arun Joshi is one of the Indo-English authors who gave the new direction the Indian Fiction written in English. His novels are based on the rootlessness of the characters who is always in search for his identity. It seems that his own experience of living abroad is portrayed in his novels in the form of various characters.

In all his novels Joshi deals with the themes of alienation and involvement, East-West encounter and compromise, love and hate, quest and complacency, and existentialism and materialism. His fictional world is revelation of a world where man is confronted by the self and the questions of his existence. His novels are attempts toward a better understanding of the world and of himself. He has been influenced by Albert Camus and other existentialist writers.

Arun Joshi is an original talent, exploring deeper into the moral and spiritual crisis of the contemporary Indians. He is one of the few most significant Indo-English Novelists who has produced very compelling works of fiction. His literary career was highlighted by the publication of a number of novels and short stories. The publication of *The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) revealed the making of a brilliant novelist in him. This was followed by *The Apprentice* (1974) and a collection of his short stories under the title *The Survivor* which was published in 1976. Earlier in 1975, he had brought the biography, *Lala Shri Ram: a Study in entrepreneurship in Industrial Management*. His next novel *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), won him the Sahitya Academy award in 1982. His last novel *The City and The River* was published in 1990. At last his untimely death in 1993 cut short his literary career.

Arun Joshi has to his credit five novels – *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, *The Apprentice*, *The Last Labyrinth*, and *The City and The River*, and a collection of stories entitled : *The Survivor*. His novels deals with social alienation, and simultaneously explore in the Indian context some universal questions of human existence and delineate, to use Verghese's words, "the search for the essence of human living". Though his protagonists are alienated from society, they do not become indifferent to it, as is the case with the protagonists of Camus' in *The Outsider*. They continue to search for a meaningful stance in life. Eventually they "step out of themselves and question on their consciousness but their own self indulgent attitude keeping them away from facing the truth." In fact it is this self-indulgent attitude, this indecision and uncertainty which is the root cause of their anxiety and

existential despair. This passivity in their personalities ultimately leads them to the final crisis of their lives, where they realize the folly of their past inaction and indecision. Unable to identify themselves with the values of life, they reach a point where they realize that all human beings are essentially alone and death is the only ultimate reality.

In this paper, the effort is made to study Arun Joshi's concept and problem of identity in the novel 'The Foreigner'. Therefore his novel will be studied in the terms of existential philosophy. In the following paper, the effort is made to unfold the mystery of man's psyche to go back to his earlier roots.

2. The Foreigner: From Alienation To Arrival:

Arun Joshi is one of the Indian Novelists, who takes up the issues and problems faced by a man in the present global world. Globalization is supposed to be the best philosophy as far as business is concerned but life has become difficult in the present scenario. In order to search for better life, man has uprooted himself from his own culture. Materially he perhaps achieved all the comforts, but in this bargain he has lost his mental peace. Arun Joshi depicts in his novels, particularly in *The Foreigner* that man can attain materialistic comforts but his search for peace remains unachievable. This search makes man to struggle as Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner* to achieve the peace which according to Joshi is possible only through complete detachment from himself, which makes him commit to others. There are moments in the protagonist's life when he realize the futility of life which is one of the basic problems of existentialism philosophy but Joshi suggest the way to make this life useful.

With the publication of his very first novel, *The Foreigner*, Arun Joshi emerged on the Indian English Literary scene. It established Arun Joshi as a mature and outstanding novelist. *The Foreigner* has been regarded as "one of the most compelling existential works of Indo – English Fiction". The novel takes us to the depths of human suffering and the inferno of existential agony, which becomes more acute in his subsequent works. *The Foreigner* is, in the main, the study of "an uprooted young man living in the latter half of the twentieth century", who looks out "moorings and a meaning in his randomly drifting life." It is a poignant portrayal of Sindi Oberoi's unhappy and meaningless existence. In it, Arun Joshi explores the individual's anguished consciousness of being isolated from the whole apparatus of social conventions and moral proprieties, and his attempt to understand and face with dignity the abominable absurdity of the world.

Sindi Oberoi is a man without roots and so he feels lost, alien and alone wherever he goes. He fails to perceive any meaning or purpose in life. Born of a Kenyan-Indian father and English mother, he is orphaned at the age of four when his parents met their end in an air crash near Cairo. Their only reality for him is “a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs.” Deprived of parental love and affection in his very childhood, he becomes broken anchorless. With the death of his uncle, who brought him up in the absence of his parents, Sindi has lost his emotional anchor forever.

Against this background of emotional rootlessness, the various incidents of Sindi’s life appear more comprehensible. This vagrant intellectual moved from Nairobi where he is born, to London where he studies, to Saho where he works as a dishwasher and barman, to Scotland where he works at a small village library and discusses religion, God and mysticism with a Catholic Priest, to Boston where he studies for six years and meets June and Babu and finally to Delhi where he settles down, but fails to establish a sense of meaningful relatedness with the world. Even in Delhi, he feels an outsider: “I was considered quite a misfit. My foreign background stood against me.” He is a born foreigner and “is an alien everywhere physically as well as metaphorically.” He is a wanderer without moorings and a sense of belonging anywhere. Even when he gets his Ph.d. degree, his regret is that no education and degrees can teach one how to live.

Sindi’s philosophy of detachment is not the result of pragmatic approach to life, but of his search for wrong things in wrong places. His cynicism and detachment become a veneer of shying away from involvement and commitment, and send him from crisis to crisis. His false notion of living without desire is badly shattered when his ideal theory of non-involvement comes into clash with the reality of life during his passionate involvement with June Blyth. This crisis brings Sindi face to face with his hypocrisy, cowardice and stupidity. Actually Sindi wants to love and be loved but afraid of commitment and involvement due to his inherent cowardice. His experiences with June are directly in contrast with his previous relationships with Anna and Kathy. “The story of Sindi’s relationship with her (June) is a story of the gradual breaking down of the barriers of detachment and non-involvement that he had built up all his life.” Her affection and faith cause a crisis of conscience in Sindi. For the first time in his life, he is caught between two diametrically opposed pulls, those of attachment and detachment. Although he loves June deeply, yet he tries not to get attached to her for “one should be able to love without wanting to possess ... and should be able to detach oneself from the object of one’s love.” But he involves himself with June Blyth. His

passionate relationship with June is a story of the gradual coming down of the wall of non-attachment that he has raised around his soul. Though conscious of what is happening he finds himself helpless to resist it.

The reality of the situation is that Sindi is deeply in love with June in spite of his vigorous attempt to avoid the temptation. His desire to remain free and uninvolved is only an illusion. He forms the delusion for himself that he is detached under the circumstances. This detachment of Sindi, in any case, is beyond the understanding of June and it ultimately alienates her from him. She cannot put up with Sindi's philosophy of detachment. She tells him: "I had wanted to belong to you, but you didn't want it. You are so self-sufficient that there is hardly any place for me in your life except perhaps as a mistress." June who regards the purpose of her life in being of use to someone, turns to the young Indian student Babu, after getting disappointed from Sindi. Both are engaged to be married, but just before marriage, the relationship breaks down. Sindi makes love to her when she is terribly depressed due to the failure of her adjustment with Babu in a belief that he is helping her. But he forgets that "she belonged to Babu and there were three not two persons involved."^[12] Babu, being frustrated emotionally, due to his academic failure, the fear of his father's roaring image before him and the suspicion that June is carrying on with Sindi, quarrels with her and in a fit of depression commits suicide.

Thus the false detachment of Sindi drives Babu to death. June accuses him and say: "Look, what your detachment has done." In Babu's death, oriental innocence is destroyed in the strange ways of the western world. June also dies later. Her death is a symbol of 'cultural lag'. After Babu's suicide and June's death, which caused due to Sindi's misleading knowledge of detachment and attachment, Sindi decides to leave America. It becomes a turning point in his career. His decision to go to India and the way it is made by a flip of coin reveals that now careful choice and thoughtful planning have lost their charm for him. This is a sign of progression from the 'having' to the 'being' mode of existence.

Consequently when Sindi comes to India, he encounters at Khemka's house that bronze figure of the dancing Shiva. The dancing Shiva is the paradox of truth; he is both destructive fury and creative force. Similarly, Sindi Oberoi is a paradox who passes through a process of death and a new man is born. At last, in the wake of his past experiences Sindi reaches his destination, he comes to know the purpose of his existence on this planet, in search of which he has been restlessly wandering from place to place. He is no more afraid of love, of

freedom, of growth, of involvement: he becomes himself. He ultimately discovers man's own nature and with this self-knowledge he enters manhood. The rootless Sindi finds a direction and purpose of life. He is not alienated from the society but from himself. Shuttling between attachment and detachment; love and hate; participation and withdrawal; he finally settles down in India for he truly belongs to it. From a life of alienation in America and England, he moves to a life of identification in India.

The progression of events in the novel is not linear but zig-zag. Thus the place of action in the novel shifts frequently, Boston, New York and London being only some of the places where some important events in the hero's life take place. The events are jumbled up in their sequence in order to ensure suspense and thereby keep up the interest of the reader. On the whole, *The Foreigner* is a remarkably well written novel of Arun Joshi. It has the distinction of being one of the few novels on Indo-English fiction which pointedly deal in artistic terms, with the pros and cons of the existentialist thought.

3. Conclusion:

On the contemporary scene of the Indo-English novel, Arun Joshi stands out as a highly significant novelist. He is a conscientious writer who experiments with the medium of the novel as an expression of the existentialist predicaments and dilemmas of his protagonists as they struggle to grapple with moments of acute spiritual crisis. Joshi emerges as a novelist not in the tradition of Jane Austen, Dickens, Anand, Narayan, Kamala Markandaya or Bhabani Bhattacharya, but rather one in the line of descendance of Kafka, Camus, Sartre and Saul Bellow, Ellison and Malamud. His main characters are in search of their lost self, their identity.

Arun Joshi, like the existential writers, is passionately concerned with man's feeling of alienation and anxiety in life. But he differs from the western existential writers in the sense that in him the existentialist dilemma, the anguish of alienation and the absurdity of situation never remain the final predicament. He is also different from Indo-English writers like Raja Rao or Sudhin Ghosh, who hold up renunciation as the ideal mode of Indian life, and anchor their novels to some Indian philosophical system. He does not accept alienation or absurdity as the contingent condition of human life. Instead of that his central motif is quest, and all his heroes are questers and seekers.

To sum up, it can be said that Joshi's presentation of the tormented and conflicting self of the contemporary man has added new dimensions to the Indo-English novel. His novels have a universal imperishable importance for their affirmative eloquent message for the humanity and therein lies his inimitable talent astounding originality. His protagonists seriously search for meaning and definition of life through a process of active experience, generally leading to the realization that only love, compassion, sincerity, courage and fidelity to one's own self can counter-balance the sense of meaninglessness and sterility in modern life. Arun Joshi's constant faith in the possibility of positive affirmation sets him apart from some of the existentialists whose search for values always remains open-ended. Despite his contribution of only five novels and a few short stories to the Indo-English writing, Arun Joshi seems as a bright star in the galaxy of Indo-English Novelists.

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