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## Existential Predicament in Arun Joshi's Novels

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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. He has also worked out various dimensions of pressures exerted by the complex character and demands of the society in which modern man doomed to live. This awareness of man's rootlessness and the consequential anxiety is the keynote in Joshi's unique vision of the plight of modern man. His novels delineate human problems rather than issue arising out of ephemeral loyalties, Joshi-marks a definite departure from the general run of Indian novelists in English and his experimentations in themes and technique have added new dimensions to the art of the novels.

Lionel Trilling is of the view that the novel is a perpetual quest for reality and that it is the most effective agent of the moral imagination in our time. The Indian novel in English is now an integral part of Indian reality.

### Introduction

The most besetting problem that man faces today is the problem of meaninglessness. As Edmund Fuller remarks in our age: "man suffer not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problem... a conviction of isolation, randomness, [and] meaninglessness in his way of existence."<sup>1</sup> The problem of meaninglessness is so pervasive that it threatens to corrode every sphere of human life.

Man fails to perceive today the very purpose behind life and the relevance of his existence in a hostile world. Notwithstanding unprecedented scientific and technological advancements, which have added immensely to his physical pleasures and comforts, the contemporary man is doomed to find himself in a tragic mess. The prevailing economic conditions culminating in the abject poverty of the masses and the economic squeeze of the middle class on the one hand, and the economic affluence of the newly rich on the other, the drag of social conventions and traditions, the fast changing value system consequent upon the impact of rapid modernization accruing from industrialization and urbanization, the inter-generational tensions engendered with changing ethos, all these make increasing and often disturbing demands on the individual and contribute in their own ways to this sense of meaninglessness of life.

The present century has been 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.”<sup>2</sup> Deprived of the succor of ancient wisdom, which provided the much-needed basis for value and meaningfulness in life, the modern man has no substitute for faith and religion except science and information. Thinkers like Aldous Huxley have aptly pointed out that “ours is a world in which knowledge accumulates and wisdom decays.”<sup>3</sup>

The potential meaninglessness of human existence has corroded human life from various quarters. The existential “encounter with Nothingness” and the tenuousness of human existence are prototypical of modern life. The hiatus between what the individual aspires for and what he practices, and between what he achieves, between what he professes and what he practices, and between what he really is and what he would like to appear, has mercilessly crumpled his life leaving an insidious effect on his inner being. The injuries inflicted and the scars left on his psyche generate a cynical attitude towards the established social norms and values and make him grope for life’s relevance.

Man is shocked to find that he is no longer the master of his destiny and that there are forces which threaten to wither his life and all its joys and hopes. He comes to feel helpless in the fundamental sense that he cannot control what he is able to foresee. Angst-ridden and utterly hopeless, he finds quite a few mechanisms and processes beyond his understanding and, consequently, suffers from a deep sense of powerlessness and meaninglessness. Life has grown today ‘indefinitely vast’ without any proper ‘interlinkage’ to hold it together from falling apart. Painfully aware of his precarious position, man experiences severe limitations in today’s set-up and an acute terror of the world augmented by its randomness. “Man, “says Paul Tillich, “is drawn into the world of objects and has lost or is continuously losing.”<sup>4</sup> 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 may become robots, who will destroy their world and themselves because they cannot stand... a meaningless life.”<sup>5</sup>

The pervasive sense of meaninglessness is thus the most dominant feature of the human condition in the contemporary epoch. It is the realization of what Frank Johnson calls ‘fractionated functions’ that is responsible for one’s felt insignificance of life and its affairs. The plight of the modern man has been discussed by See man under a set of five inter-related operational conditions, viz. powerlessness, normlessness, isolation, self-estrangement and meaninglessness, which he considers to be different manifestations of alienation. He analyzes “the search for, meaning” in terms of the increase of “functional rationality” and the concomitant decline of “substantial rationality”<sup>6</sup> as individual’s “capacity to act intelligently in a given situation on the basis of one’s own insight into the interrelations of events.”<sup>7</sup> This state of affairs is most likely to generate feelings of authenticity and meaninglessness. The existential states of disappointment, isolation and meaninglessness have received adequate attention in the West. All

sensitive people feel concerned about the unfortunate spiritual predicament of that modern man. His inner problems have been treated in considerable detail in modern literature, particularly in the fiction. "Whatever that fiction may be said to deal with, it is surely safe to say that it deals, either manifestly or covertly, with our emotional problems."<sup>8</sup>

No emotional problem is more threatening today than the pervasive sense of meaninglessness. Conditions in India, though not so alarming as in the western world, have begun to take a dismal turn. Victor Anand has discussed the moral confusion of modern Indians who live on "an ad-hoc basis" in "a no man's land of values." Heirs to two sets of customs and torn asunder by a dual code of behaviour, they live lazily in opportunism, treachery, cowardice, hypocrisy and wit," and are, dreaming of "walking up in some cloud-cuckoo land of bliss." This, according to Anand, is due to their "moral inertia and flabbiness," which has given them "all the grandeur and all the emptiness of hypnotized people."<sup>9</sup>

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 odyssey of the twentieth century 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."<sup>10</sup> 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.

Arun Joshi's first novel, *The Foreigner* (1968), explores in depth the problems of Sindi Oberoi. It has been remarked: "A strange feelings of aloneness and aloofness permeates the entire narrative and provides the necessary texture and structure to the novel."<sup>11</sup> The hero belongs to no country, no people and regards himself as an uprooted young man living aimlessly in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Sindi is trapped in his own loneliness, which is accentuated by his withdrawal from the society around him. He wonders:

In what way, if any, did I belong to the world that roared beneath my apartment window. Somebody had begotten me without a purpose, and so far I had lived without a purpose. Perhaps I felt like that because I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if I had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter! It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner.<sup>13</sup>

At a deeper level, *The Foreigner* can be viewed as an attempt to plumb man's perennial dilemmas. His alienation is of the soul and not of geography. As he himself confides, his "foreignness" lies "within" him and drives him from crisis to crisis rendering it difficult for him to leave himself behind wherever he goes. Right from the beginning, he is oppressed by a desire to find little meaning of life.

Joshi's another novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) 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. Billy is aware of the deeper layers of his personality and feels totally alienated from the superficial reality of life. It is significant to note that Van Gogh's turbulent career held considerable fascination for Billy at one time. Billy's expression itself is symptomatic of a mixture of nearly all those emotions that one tends to associate with a great predicament. "No other man" than him, we are told, "so desperately pursued the tenuous thread of existence to its bitter end."<sup>14</sup> Renouncing his past, his family and the everyday world, the rich, sophisticated and U.S.-educated Billy goes in search of the meaning of life. The novel probes into his dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun.

Billy's experience just before he takes the momentous decision to make the final departure into the jungle on the second day of his expedition has mystic undertones and reminds us of Siddhartha's renunciation of his wife and child. Billy felt as if the inheritors of the cosmic night were waiting and walking and staring at him and he was the first man on earth facing the earth's first night. 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. When he comes into contact with Bilasia, who reflects, according to him, the very quintessence of the primitive force, he feels that he has suddenly discovered that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than a poor reflection of million others.

Joshi's another novel, *The Apprentice* (1974), also depicts, though less exhaustively, the plight of the contemporary man, who is sailing about in a confused society without norms, without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose. The protagonist, Ratan Rathor, comes of an impoverished middle-class family. He has to find his own way and pay his own price in this world. He is the child of a double inheritance. His father was patriotic and courageous, but his mother was endowed with worldly wisdom. She often reminded Ratan that 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 a law unto itself.

The man who grew violent and rebellious even at the thought of careers and bourgeois filth, becomes in due course a thick-skin and washout. While he tries to seek solace from the annals of corruption, his dying conscience keeps on pricking him. At every stage he puts up an initial resistance only to discover the futility of his efforts. He sums up the problem of people like him as follows:

No one seemed to be sure whether what was right was practicable.

That was where the rub lay. In the practicability of things. That was where I saw the best of them buckle. Because very often the best did not have the daring or the greed of the charlatans. Thus the charlatans won. And when they saw the charlatans winning the best became even less sure of themselves. And a times they timed charlatans.<sup>15</sup>

Joshi's Sahitya Akademi Award winner novel, *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), probes into the turbulent inner world of an industrialist, Som Bhaskar, who becomes a millionaire at the age of thirty. He is married to a woman of his choice, who has borne him two children and is all that a wife could be, yet he goofed it all up and is relentlessly driven by undefined hungers. Amidst intriguing, juxtapositions, the novel plunges into a haunting world of life, love, God and Death, the greatest of all mysteries – "the last labyrinth." With its spiritual and sensuous dimensions interwoven, it is story of deeper seekings through love.

The novel raises some pertinent questions about life and its meaning and tries 'to unravel the still unresolved mysteries of God and Death.

The greatest dilemma of human life is its ultimate reality, i.e. death. Like his father, Som is vexed by the mere thought of it. He says: "There was nothing I loathed more than I loathed the sight of death." He wants to know its secret "without nagging, enervating doubts." If death is to wind up all, what is the point in running madly with outstretched arms in pursuit of "little pleasures" or "little vendettas of life!"<sup>16</sup>

Joshi's next novel called *The City and the River* (1990) continues to treat, in its own ironical manner, the predicament of his characters in a hostile world. The crisis of the individual, however, has been replaced by the socio-political crisis of the City, which is a conglomerate of individuals and can be said to represent the whole humanity. In this novel also, Joshi poses significant questions about identity, commitment and faith. But these questions are approached from the standpoint of politics. The novel also throws significant sidelights on the relevance of meaning in life.

## **Conclusion**

Joshi has tried to present in his novels solutions to problems arising out of one's awareness of the lack of the purpose or meaning of life. The most devastating effect that ubiquitous meaninglessness can have is the stifling of spontaneity of the individual's personality, which has been conceived in terms of the spontaneous assertion of one's individual initiative, feelings, wishes, and opinions. A realization of the meaninglessness in life is a prelude to its diagnosis and cure. As Knoff suggests, the process of creating meaninglessness itself becomes centrally meaningful. Becker, too, is of the opinion that various states of alienation, including

meaninglessness, tend to become in proper hands quest for value, significance meaning and transcendence. It would therefore be worthwhile to evaluate in some detail the solutions suggested by Joshi in his novels.

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