

Thematic Concerns in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*: A Critical View

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Abstract:

Indo –Anglican Literature or Indian English Literature has come a long way from being viewed patronizingly by the British to making occasional forays into the literary scene and being acknowledged as a popular genre of Modern English Literature. Indian writers have contributed quality and a distinctive touch to those who have not breathed the air of this land and lived in the midst of its people, can hardly aspire to appreciate.

Arun Joshi is quite an exceptional novelist who stands apart from the rest of the novelists, who has taken up the themes of human predicament in almost all his novels. The overall and outstanding quest in all his novels is for a concrete direction and meaning in one's life. Joshi has been influenced by existential thinkers like Camus, Sartre and this can be observed in his novels. Existentialism is a modern philosophic movement that deals with 'man's' disillusionment and despair which originated in the philosophical and literary writings of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The present paper, a critical perception, focuses mainly on various significant themes of Arun Joshi's first novel "The Foreigner".

Keywords: Indian Literature, Arun Joshi, thematic concerns, Existentialism, Rootlessness

Introduction

Indian English literature is a discipline that tried to reach the utmost levels of creativity and criticism. The earlier bandages of skepticism and cynicism do not appear in the present scenario and have disappeared with the passage of time. This literature has gained acclamation worldwide. The international attention to their Indian writers may be due to the elements of Indians conveyed through their works. Most of the writers have included Indian themes, symbols, myths etc. some of the then can be traced to be the caste stem, social attitudes, superstitions, religious taboos etc...

Novel as a literary genre is quite new to India. Formerly epics, dramas, lyrics have their own history dating to several centuries back. Novels are being written and published in regional languages as well as English. The novel in India on the whole is rich enough and an absolute new phenomenon. Existentialist novelists mostly belonged to the period between 1950's and 1970's. The major existential novelists include Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus's Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka.

As a modern philosophical movement existentialism deals with Man's disillusionment and despair. It originated in the philosophical and literary writing of Jean Paul Sartre. Other writers include Albert Camu, Kafka, Arun Joshi, etc. Arun Joshi is a great novelist who has strongly brought to his work, detachment from the everyday while still acknowledging its existence to the literature of the world.

Arun Joshi novels are "The Foreigner" (1968). "*The strange case of Billy Biswas*" (1971), "*The Apprentice*" 1974, "*The Last Labyrinth*" (1981) and "*The City and the River*" (1990) and a collection of stories – '*The survivor*' (1975).

Joshi's first novel, 'The Foreigner' is one of the most unique existentialist works of Indian fiction. The novel reminds one of Albert Camus, "*The Outside*" though thematically they differ from each other. The novel also reminds one of Anita Desai's, '*Bye Bye Blackbird*'.

As a matter of fact, the novel depicts the plight of a young man who is totally lost in a world of meaningless and tries to cast an apprehensive and meaningful light on his past and his endeavour to try to find a meaning to his life in the present. The protagonist is caught between the past and future and unable to understand how to bring a balance between the two to secure a meaning in his life.

Sindhi Oberoi a Kenyan – born Indian of mixed parentage feels that he is rootless in his ancestry, does not have any bearings of stability and feels that he is completely lost almost like a foreigner and tries not to achieve and realize that novel of belonging to' and gets involved with anybody and everything that comes across his way and life as a foreigner as he does not want attachment and involvement without any wanting or desire.

Throughout the novel there are situations of Sindhi Oberoi trying to detach and alienate himself from the prevailing circumstances

Finally by Muthu's comment "Sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved "Stimulates Sindhi to accept that the real meaning of detachment is "Consistently getting involved with the word".

"The foreigner" is indeed a serious novel and progress through a serious reflection on love, marriage, suicide, freedom, detachment, alienation, dissatisfaction which sets the reader to contemplate on those issues.

Sindhi Oberoi is the central character as well as the narrator in "*The Foreigner*". He being the son of a mixed parentage i.e. his mother a British national and his father a Kenyan Indian, Sindhi knows that he doesn't belong anywhere. His entire view of life and responses are colored by his childhood deprivation of love from his parents. Therefore he entertained a deep sense of insecurity, unreality and impatience about things. He is not only a foreigner to the new cultures between which he shuttled, but also to his soul. He was an orphan both in terms of human relations and his emotional roots.

The Foreigner (1968) is the first novel written by Arun Joshi who explores the predicament of the protagonist struggling to arrive at reality in the midst of utter chaos and meaninglessness of the mind. He is concerned with the plight of modern man and is sensitive to

the various pressures exerted on the human mind in which the contemporary man is destined to live.

“*The Foreigner*” opens with the death of Babu and the response of its narrator who is also protagonist Sindhi Oberoi, to it.

“They uncovered his face and I turned away invite myself.”

Analyzing the situation and the character that symbolizes the predicament of modern man, Arun Joshi within the framework of the novel seems to expose the meaninglessness and rootlessness experienced by Sindhi Oberoi, the main protagonist alongside the other character. Rootless as Sindhi’s life takes him to London, Boston and New Delhi. In New Delhi he meets the Kenka’s for the first time after Baba’s death. In the conversation that follows.

“After lunch conversation centered around, what I wanted to do in life. When I I don’t know, Mr.Khenka frowned. He asked we what sort of Job I was looking for”.

I want to do something meaningful, “I replied, and then it occurred to me then the statement was a mistake.

“What do you mane by meaningful “Mr. Khemla asked?

I wanted to say that it should be something that cold makes me forget myself, but I changed my mind”.

In the above situation it can be observed at the outset, that Sindhi Oberai is a confused person who is always searching for meaning in life when the existing situation around him is quite meaningful to the other persons present around him rather than himself. Sindhi’s parentage and early life indicate that he is an ideal foreigner. His mother was English and father was an Indian, he was brought up in Kenya studied in London and America. He was orphaned at the age of four and was brought up by his uncle whose death later snatched any kind of leverage for him to bank on life was lost completely. Sindhi expresses that his life was being always “alone in darkness”.

Sindhi goes to America for his doctoral degree in Mechanical Engineering. There he made friendship with Babu Kemka. He also meets June and with whom he has an intimate and passionate affair. During his stay in England he had affairs with quite a few girls of which he is specifically mentions Anna and Kathy. Though he enjoyed these relationships, they all “fizzled out like an ill packed cracker” because he “couldn’t pay the price of being loved”. In spite of loving June intensely and knows very well that it would be sheer madness if he lets her go, does not commit himself to accept marriage, he tries not to get attached to her and gives an explanation as” One should be able to love without wanting to possess.... One should be able to detach oneself from the agent of one’s love”. He tries to impress her importance of detachment in love.

“Absence of love does not mean hatred. Hatred is just another form of love. There is another way of loving you can love without attachment, without desire. You can love without attachment to the objects of your love. You can love without fooling yourself that the things you

love are indispensable either to you or to the world. Love is real only when you know that what you love must one day die”.

From the above lines it can be assumed that, even though Sindhi had an opportunity to convey his feelings of love to June, he gets into a discussion on love attachment, detachment which leads to possession and marriage ultimately. Sindhi was of the view that one should be able to detach oneself from the object of one's love. He did not want to get involved. He says “everywhere I turned to I saw enrollment”. To know that he had an opportunity to express his love and not utilizing that chance and completely detaching himself by not getting involved reveals meaninglessness of Sindhi.

June finds Sindhi Oberoi's strange person who does not enjoy being with others even though he is among them. She says that he lacks warmth and spontaneity like any other normal person. She even tells Sindhi about this.

“There is something strange about you, you know, somewhat distant I'd guess that when people are with you they don't feel like they are with human being I have a feeling you would be a foreigner everywhere for this Sindhi justifies his predicament as such.

“My foreignness lay within me and I couldn't leave myself behind wherever I went”.

From these lines it can be assumed that any person with a balanced mind and controlled attitude forgets himself and his egoistic principles, mingles easily and enjoys the company of others and he is capable of responding positively and productively to any situation. He completely forgets about his position, knowledge, views that he cherishes. Unfortunately this does not take place in Sindhi's life.

In one of his discussions with June Blyth on love Sindhi says.

..... I have loved people as much as I love myself. It visits much but that is not my fault. And then to be in love in your sense requires one to take things seriously, assume that there a permanence about things. Nothing ever seems real to me, leave alone permanent nothing seems to be very important”.

Sindhi tries to involve some work or the other so that he doesn't get involved with any woman, but on meeting June and getting familiar with her. June tries to involve him in conversations on various topics including love with view to know more about Sindhi's personal life. All along he desires to physically possess her at the same time struggles to remain detached and uninvolved. Actually Sindhi suffers from a deep sense of insecurity lack of parental love and reality. He comments that to be love means to get involved which leads to attachment and then commitment and marriage. He views marriage as pain and suffering and way which does not last forever. He confesses that “I was not the kind of man one could love; I had learnt that long ago.”

His insecurity and his feeling defenses disallow him to love others and also be loved by others. His casual attitudes do not make him realize the reality and permanence of things in life. It makes him develop a fear of involvement.

This attitude of Sindhi indicates a deliberate inaction in him. He does not respond to situations spontaneously, but keeps contemplating his views in deep oriented thoughts.

Bitter experiences in Sindhi's childhood and his experiences with Anna and Kothey are made him a segregated man. In his childhood he had seriously contemplated suicide. June and Shiela Kenka's comments that he would be a foreigner anywhere and Shiela Kenka's comment that you are still a foreigner and you don't belong here reveal his sense of loneliness even though he is with there. He does not 'fit in' in the world and his way of life becomes intolerable. He is trapped in his own loneliness which is accentuated by his withdrawal from the society around him. He says, "in a way it has been like a small death". Consequently he becomes 'cynical and exhausted, grown old before his time, weary with his own loneliness.

The similar statements have been observed about Nalini.

"You want fit in, you've joined the last generation out of place everywhere and acceptance nowhere you will be a foreigner, a refuge from yourself. You can't belong you'll like in two worlds and fall between two stools." you are still a foreigner, you don't belong here" Sindhi replies.

"I wondered in what way, if any did I belong to the world that roared beneath my apartment window. Somebody has begotten me 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. My foreignness lay within me and I couldn't leave myself behind wherever I went".

Sindhi associates himself with Babu Rao, Khenka with whom Sindhi involves himself while working for his doctoral degree in best on. Babu is an over protected son of a Delhi business tycoon and things that Anonica is a paradise for free sex. He argues with Sindhi.

"What is the good of coming to America, if one is not to play around with girls?"

These lines exhibit the image of Babu Khenka's free enjoyment in abroad. Babu's association with Sindhi gives a clear picture of an educated and rich Indian family. Babu also makes only American friends and does not mix with Indian all the time. Babu's father tells Sindhu "I had brought him up with all the care that a father can give to a child Even as a child, I had myself taught him what was right and what was wrong". (P.S.119).

Sindhi's friend Babu as only 'a Kid' who is over protected and innocent and a little rich father's boy.

A critic rightly observed on this over protectiveness and innocence and not possessing the toughness as:

This care and upbringing of Babu possess so much that they deprive him of taking up decision and hamper his free will and capacity to make resolutions. Babu is always filled with awe of his father and the thought of his failure in examination make Babu cringe at his father's expectations. He is apprehensive of his father's admonitions. When June comes to know about Babu's fear of his father she observes and comments that he seems to be an awful bully.

Babu is attracted to June while Babu is incapable of making resolutions. Sindhi does not make them “because the pain of breaking them was too unbearable” (P.S.156). One can’t take decisions, the other would not for fear of decisions Sindhi’s refusal to marry June brings Babu and June together. Even though Sindhi observes babu and June coming close he does not make any attempts to stop them. One fine day when he requests June to dine with him she declines and informs him that she and Babu getting married. Sindhi is devastated and by this tense his carefully cultivated detachment has vanished completely leaving him totally miserable. It is strange that though Sindhi is not willing to marry June, he is deeply agonized when she is separated from him. He reminisces about the time he spent with her and keeps whispering to himself. The below lines depict the burden of his memories.

“Here is where we met, here I bought a book, there she wanted me to kiss, and my heart would sink with the burden of my memories and I couldn’t help whispering to myself, my darling! Oh my darling. It can be very well observed that these are not the words of “One who should be able to detach from the object of one’s love” (P.S.60).

Sindhi is totally confessed regarding what rules to adopt and what kind of life to lead. He takes of detachment sometimes and about the inevitability of things sometimes, but gets involved everywhere. Babu and June get engaged and this comes as a blow to Sindhi. Though Babu Loves June, he is frequently haunted by jealous and suspicions. He is totally helpless as he had promised his father that he’ll never marry in America. June is frowned with Babu’s behavior and wants to return to Sindhi. Sindhi tries to comfort her by making love to her without any serious interest. Babu could not bear the infidelity of his beloved June and ends by being drunk and driven himself to his death. He evades his life by meeting with an accident. “Look what your detachment has done” (P.S.184). June accuses Sindhi of Babu’s death and later she too dies during her abortion.

Sindhi is filled with a sense of guilt and remorse as he progresses towards an irrigated into the nature of life and action. The detachment as exemplified in ‘The Gita’ does not mean inaction as Sindhi realizes. Lord Krishna had warned Arjuna against inaction.

“Detachment at that time had meant inaction. Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachment consisted of right action and not escapes from it. The Gods had set a heavy price to teach me just that (P.S.204)”.

The inaction of Sindhi and the deaths of two persons close to him are a warning to him. By now he fully understands. He wants to resolve him from within by knowing the meaning of life. He has a numerous with catholic priest in Scotland which makes him realize that one “Can love without attachment, without desire” (180).

After these shocking events Sindhi leaves America and moves to New Delhi. Sindhi a man of non-involve gradually gets involved in the business of Mr. Khemka. He also strengthens his relationship with Babu’s sisters Shiela. He is attracted to Shiela who becomes his liberation and leads him to self awareness and self knowledge. The social parties arranged frequently at Mr. Khemka’s house make him notice a bronze figure of the dancing Shiva. The image of dancing Shiva made Sindhi to undergo a complete change. The birth of new man is taking place within him and realizes the operation of the law of Karma in his. His faith in the law of Karma is affirmed in his thought that “we think we leave our actions behind, but the part in never dead.

Time has a way of executing its toll and the more you try to hold the heavier the tool is (P.S.181).

He behaves in a more confident way with the expansion of his vision. The barriers of detachment gradually melt away with the flow of humanism and comparison. He is deeply aware of this new orientation in his way of life and adds orientation to his name "Surrender" the future may provide him 'a chance 'to redeem the part (234). He is angered at khemleas's dishonest pralines and takes upon himself to help the poor workers. Muthu resends him to take over the office.

Sindhi goes to meet Muthu. Muthu and his problems bring about a major chance in Sindhi's life. Muthu is human suffering precompiled. He learns from Nuthu that "Sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved".

The little foreigner gain symbolic importance in the larger context of human existence. The protagonist's physical anguish and pain portrays the meaning of his life. The foreigner has a remarkable degree of maturity suited to his theme. Sindhi eventually perceives release from the meaningless amid of life through Karma yoga and the principle of action without attachment achieving him in the end

Conclusion

The title of the novel on the whole becomes symbolic as the protagonist experiences 'foreignness' in his life. The truth that detachment does not exist in withdrawal, but in involvement is quite apt with the existential hero. The novel is existential as it is about an individual's loneliness and feelings of anguish emanating from his estrangement from the environment tradition and the search for the inner self. Joshi has clearly handled the existential themes of rootlessness, detachment, and the quest for the self.

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