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Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice*: A Conflict of 'Life' and 'Living'

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Arun Joshi is one of the most prominent writers among the younger Indian English novelists. His place in the field of Indian English literature during the post-independence era is undisputed. Joshi came into the limelight with his very first novel *The Foreigner* which appeared in 1968. He instantly grabbed the attention of readers as well as critics by his new thematic concerns in the genre of novel. Unlike his predecessors he neither writes fiction for entertainment nor for any social or political propaganda. He experiments with the medium of novel writing, for studying the modern man's predicament, particularly the motives responsible for his actions, and the effect of these actions on his psyche. Arun Joshi himself explains that, "My novels are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of myself" (qtd. in Dhawan, 18). Joshi probes deep into the psyche of the protagonist and picturises their mental toil and anxiety. Trapped between the Indian upbringing and Western influences, his protagonist suffers from evils of materialism which leads to up-rootedness, cynicism, loss of faith, and an identity crisis. Joshi's protagonists are modern men of this world who are lost in a society of mixed ideals. His heroes, who rather turn anti-heroes due to this confused idealism, are running a fruitless expedition. They are struggling to sustain their faith in a world which stands in opposition to them. They are unable to hold on their identity in such a world of moral confusion. So either they revolt with the society or completely yield to it. In both cases there comes an alienation. If the character revolts he is alienated from the society, and if he yields, he in turn gets alienated from his own 'real' self. The result initially is restlessness, and finally a self-exploration and self-introspection.

In all Joshi wrote five novels. His untimely death in 1993 brought a culmination to his literary career. Three of his novels *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), and *The Apprentice* (1974) were published before 1980. Then came his Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and finally the last *The City and the River* (1990). The major themes that run through all of Joshi's novels are the themes of alienation and involvement, East-West encounter and compromise, love and hate, quest and complacency, and existentialism and materialism (Kumar, 18).

There are a number of literary influences that have come into the making of Arun Joshi- a modern era novelist. A marked influence of the existentialist thinkers was very apparent on Joshi and his novels. He was very much inspired by Camus, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Kafka, Beckett and others. As a result Joshi's protagonists are the contemporary modern men, who are in a constant search for a way of life that would help them to face the existential problem of this world. This 'crisis of character' or the crisis of existence has been depicted in all his five novels. All his protagonists are restlessly searching for their roots as well as trying to attain a rational understanding of the purpose of their existence in this universe. Thus, his protagonists are, invariably, 'questers' or 'seekers'. They make a journey from illusion to reality.

The third novel of Joshi *The Apprentice*, like his earlier two novels, explores the inner recesses of a character that is torn between two conflicting philosophies – the 'life' and the 'living'. 'Life' connotes the idealism, patriotism, and faithfulness taught by Ratan Rathor's father, a freedom fighter and a martyr. The 'Living' connotes the survival instinct in a world

which is full of chaos, corruption, hypocrisy, and absurdity – where ‘Money’ is the supreme ruling power. Ratan Rathor, the protagonist of the novel, is a child of double inheritance. On one hand is his father’s idealism which teaches him to be a complete devotee for the general good of his country and his fellow people. His father gives up his lucrative career of a lawyer in order to serve his country and fight for its independence. To pursue a career for personal benefits is termed by his father as “Bourgeois filth” (Joshi, 32). But, ironically, on the other hand stands his mother’s pragmatic worldly view. Rathor remembers her advice:

Don’t fool yourself, son, she said. . . .

It was not patriotism but money, she said, that brought respect and bought security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws, she said, but money was law unto itself. (Joshi 19)

Such opposing ideals led to the crisis in his character. He never in his life felt competent of differentiating between the right and the wrong. He became a man of ‘double’ personality, where he thought in one way and acted in the other. There remained no synchronisation between his thoughts and action. So, consequently, he felt powerless and alienated from his own self and his surroundings as well. Tapan Ghosh observes in this context:

Crisis in the soul of an individual, who is entangled in the mess of contemporary life with its confusion of values and moral anarchy and his untiring quest for a remedy lie at the core of Arun Joshi’s exploration of human reality in *The Apprentice*. (Ghosh, 90)

Initially when he comes to Delhi, a land of opportunities, he is full of hope and optimism. His rustic innocence reminds us of the men who came to America, lured by the ‘American Dream’ of being successful and famous. Similarly, Ratan Rathor arrives in Delhi with a desire to earn a name and prosperous future for himself. He says, “And I had no doubt that . . . I should make a mark on the world, a mark as visible and striking as my father’s” (Joshi 23). As long as Ratan followed his father’s idealism he retained his moral core – he had a ‘life’ within him. But the cut-throat competition and a corrupt and materialistic society tested his ethics and patience at each and every step. He undergoes a humiliating experience while searching for a job, and is rejected and jeered at every interview. He realised that, “the jobs would be filled by people who had, in some manner, been pre-selected” (Joshi 29). Threatened by a bleak future, without influential connections, Ratan undergoes a profound change. As a consequence he completely yields to the sham standards of his society. He learns to keep up appearances by discarding even ordinary decency and friendship. However, it was not his ‘real’ self. He was compelled and pressurised by the society itself. Thus, he was always aware of his hypocrisy. He describes his own deviation from the correct path and says:

I had added a new dimension to my life. I had become, at the age of twenty-one, a hypocrite and a liar; in short, a sham From morning till night I told more lies than truths. I had become a master faker a faker soon forgets who he really is That is when all starts to crumble. (Joshi 27)

Though he realises that somehow, knowingly or unknowingly, he is proceeding on the wrong path, still he feels helpless. He cannot stop himself because ‘living’ is more important than a ‘life’ of ideals. And to ‘live’ he has to become practical and selfish. Earlier it was the question of survival, but later it became mere indulgence. Ratan couldn’t realise that once a man starts lying and deceiving, he is forced to continue it. It becomes difficult to free oneself from the hold of corruption. Such is the power and enchantment of ‘money’ that Rathor takes a bribe when he least needed it. Basically there was no specific reason for taking the bribe -

neither need nor compulsion.

. . . I did not need the money. I am quite sure of that. I needed it no more than sitting here, after two cups of tea, I need a third. I may drink it because others do, or because it is offered free, but I need it neither for survival nor happiness. (Joshi 58)

He realises, during his confession, that corruption had become a natural part of his existence. It was as natural to him as breathing – done throughout the day, without giving it a second thought. Ratan finds himself completely lost in this atmosphere. For the sake of job security and promotion, he even agrees to marry his boss' niece. At that time he had no plans of marriage, but still he agrees because he gets an assurance from his superintendent that he would never become jobless. More than the proposal of marriage, he was satisfied by this assurance. Gradually, he realises that the world runs on 'deals'. In fact his marriage too was a deal for his career.

If men forgot how to make deals the world would come to a stop It is not the atom or the sun or God or sex that lies at the heart of the universe: it is DEALS They are simply there, like air. (Joshi 48)

So he becomes well-settled in life and enjoys all the material comforts, still there is no satisfaction at heart. Discontentment had become a way of life for Ratan. He feels that there is something that he still lacks due to which he is not content. In order to fill that scarcity in life he goes to every extent of indecency. He starts taking interest in women, visits prostitutes, takes alcohol, and all other immoral acts. But still he is not satisfied. With the advent of 'monetary' power, his 'life' becomes more monotonous and dead. He is 'living' without 'life'. However, he is shaken off this moral and spiritual inertia by the death of his brother-like close friend, the Brigadier. Rathor comes to know that the bribe he took for clearing the contract of defective weapons, had directly affected the Brigadier's life. The Brigadier had to desert his post during the Indo-China war because he was supplied with defective weapons. As a result he couldn't fight and had to recede. Due to this desertion, he was going to face a court-martial. The Brigadier became mentally disturbed by such social embarrassment and had a nervous breakdown. And finally he committed suicide. This incident makes Rathor look back at his life and his actions. He is ashamed of himself and feels guilty for the Brigadier's death. It is then, that he realises the extent of his degradation. He saw:

. . . the vision of the vast pit at the bottom of which my [his] life crawled. Like a worm. And, now, this vision trailed me wherever I went I felt a fear . . . that I was going mad. . . . There is no fear like the fear of madness. . . . Those who descend into madness descend alone. Immobilised, fuddled, tongueless, misunderstood, laughed at. Thus I sank. Like a stone. (Joshi 124)

Arun Joshi seems to be largely influenced by Albert Camus' *The Fall* (1956), which is an intense dramatic monologue of an ethically downtrodden character. *The Apprentice* is also narrated in a confessional tone. Rathor uses this mode to express his dilemma and the social reality. In a retrospective style, he narrates his journey from innocence to experience. He, very passionately, picturises every minor and major incident that brought his downfall. Rathor makes an honest confession, without hiding or manoeuvring any detail that would reflect his hypocrisy, treachery, debauchery and finally degeneration. Rathor narrates his life-story to a young college student from the hilly areas of Punjab. Rathor hadn't confessed his guilt to anybody else earlier, but he feels an inclination to narrate everything to this boy. He says that the young boy reminds him of his father who was similarly "grave and clear-eyed" (Joshi, 7). Ratan's father's sacrifice had made an indelible impression on Ratan's psyche. So it seems that he is making his honest confession, actually, to his father's image; his father

being the only epitome of sincerity and selflessness, in his life (Sharma 58-59).

When after the death of his friend, Ratan realises his great betrayal, he seeks repentance. Initially he blames the Sheikh for all this mess, because he was the one who brought the offer to Ratan. But when Ratan confronts the Sheikh or Himmat Singh, he realises that one cannot always accuse others for one's mistake. He realises that the culprit could be found nowhere but in one's own self. The real culprit lies within us, who very easily gets enchanted with shams and the pompousness of this materialistic world. Ratan realises that one could not reform the world, but oneself. Earlier he used to think that life is like a 'zero'. A man could not take anything from a zero. But now he understood that "you can take things out of a zero! You can make it negative" (Joshi 142). So it is better to let it be a zero rather than making it 'negative. And "it becomes negative when you take out of it your sense of shame, your honour" (Joshi 142). It is generally believed that Joshi was influenced by the European existentialist philosophers. But in *The Apprentice* we comprehend that Joshi was equally influenced by the Gandhian philosophy of social service as well as the *karmic* principles of *Bhagvad Gita*.

According to Gandhi, the greatest religion of man was to put oneself to selfless service which only suffering and sacrifice can make possible. (Sharma 75)

Thus Ratan Rathor, letting the world live its corrupted standards, goes to the temple every morning, before office, and does the selfless service of wiping the shoes of the congregation. And he keeps on reminding himself of being good, being decent, and being of some 'use' to others. He remembers his father's words which laid emphasis on the 'karma' of a man: "whatever you do touches someone somewhere" (Joshi 143). This way he reaffirms his faith in 'life' and seeks to get his heart rid of the 'bourgeois filth'.

While Ratan narrates his story to the young student, one comes to realise that Ratan's life was, obviously, a conflict of 'life' and 'living'. From his childhood itself he was oppressed by this conflict. He was attracted towards both poles. 'Life' was symbolised by his father while his mother was a symbol of 'Living'. It becomes apparent that a child brought up in such an atmosphere of conflict, would later turn out to be a confused personality. He wants both, but is able to justify none. When he is idealist he is starved to death. He sees through the harsh reality of life where money, power, links and deals were the ruling factors. So he opts for such a life. But when he becomes practical, he loses contentment. All the material comforts that an ordinary man craves for, prove to be incompetent in appeasing him. Though he takes bribe and lives an indulgent life, but somewhere in heart he is always guilt-ridden. And that's why he always tries to justify his actions.

If I had taken a bribe I belonged rather to the rule than the exception A bribe could get you a bed in a hospital, a place to burn your dead For a sum of money politicians changed sides. For a larger sum they declared wars. . . . And now if I had happened to have accidentally indulged in a little slip-up, the sky was not going to fall. (Joshi 109)

There was always a "little squeaky voice" which tried to guide Rathor to the true path (Joshi 115). This 'little squeaky voice' was none other than the inner conscience of Rathor which always resisted the wrong and insincere path. But Rathor had gradually 'hardened' and become 'a man of this world' – docile, selfish, and corrupt. And so he turned a deaf ear to this voice. It is towards the end when he realises his mistake and seeks repentance, that he acknowledges the essence of his existence. He realises that life cannot be lived on extremes, i.e. completely idealist or completely practical. One needs to find a balance, a middle path – the golden path – that makes 'life' possible. Though making a 'living' is equally important, but that cannot be carried out by putting at stake one's honour, his virtues, and his

conscience. A man can be ambitious, money-minded, and even selfish but he should not be a 'lifeless soul'. To survive a balance should be reached between 'life' and 'living', else life becomes a complete 'waste'.

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