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Quest for Self in the Novels of Arun Joshi

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Abstract:

The protagonists of Arun Joshi's novels come under various pressures during the process of living. Sometimes, this pressure is exerted by the society. At other times, this pressure is psychological, political, cultural, spiritual or even the result of an innate nature. These pressures do not allow them to function in the way they want to function. They find themselves lost in the maze of existence. However, each of them makes a quest for self and tries to regain what they have lost. This paper examines how they suffer, the reasons for their suffering and how far their quest for their lost self becomes successful.

Key words: innate nature, denting, detachment, involved, intellectually barren

Arun Joshi has written only five novels namely *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), and *The City and the River* (1990). His contribution is significant in the sense that he differs from his predecessors with regard to the theme of his novels. His predecessors dealt with public issues that beset the life of the common man whereas Joshi dealt with the private problems of the individual. He renounced "the larger world in favour of the inner man" (Verghese 124-15). A study of his novels reveals that their central motif is invariably a crisis and a consequent quest for self. His protagonists are questers who are lost in the mazes of life but they are found making attempts to wriggle out of the mess and attain self-realisation.

'Self' can be said to be the 'innate nature', something that an individual is born with. This can be explained as the way nature has created an individual, and meant him to be. It can also refer to the spark of divinity that is inherent in every man. To know oneself as one *is*, is to know the self. It is pertinent to know what happens to this self in the present era and how this self is lost or misplaced, thereby requiring a quest.

Man today lives his life under severe stress and strain. The devastations and destructions caused by the two world wars, the crumbling of traditional moral values, spiritual bankruptcy, impingement of other cultures on one's own culture, demands for the gratification of the lower self, urbanisation, commercialisation of life, increase in superficiality have rendered life absurd, meaningless, directionless and futile. Besides, man experiences a chasm between what he hopes and what things turn out to be; what he wants to do and what he is compelled to do instead; and

what he is and what he would like to become. This has a serious denting effect on his psyche. Besides, man is alienated from his self as well as the society in which he lives. The protagonists of Arun Joshi face such problems. The problems that they encounter are psychological, social, political, cultural or spiritual. However, they all attempt to come out of the situations that smother them and try to regain their selves.

Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist of *The Foreigner* feels that his existence has become meaningless and purposeless. He is deprived of familial, cultural and social roots. Wherever he goes, he finds himself an alien. He receives an emotional jolt when his parents die in an air crash when he is barely four. His uncle, whose presence makes him feel secure and assured, also dies. The misfortunes early in his childhood shake his faith in God. Sindi's father was a Kenyan-Indian and his mother was an English woman. Besides, his childhood was spent in Kenya where his uncle lived. Sindi fails to assimilate the culture of any particular country. Devoid of love, care, security and cultural roots, Sindi grows a cleft in his personality and becomes a wandering alien. Even America and England, where he reaches for higher education later, fail to provide him any solace. Consequently, Sindi is alienated. The 'foreignness' in him prevents him from integrating himself fully with others and leads to the truncation of his self. The problem with Sindi is that his alienation is not merely geographical; it is ingrained into his self. While working in a library in Scotland, he comes to have the first knowledge of the mysteries that govern the universe: "All love -- whether of things, or persons or oneself -- was all illusion and all pain sprang from this illusion" (Joshi *The Foreigner* 145). This half-baked wisdom compounds his trouble in stead of solving them. Sindi applies this lesson of detachment to his relationship with June Blyth, who loves him sincerely. Sindi turns a deaf ear to the requests of June to get married to her. Sindi's practice of detachment takes him farther from her and consequently, Sindi loses her to Babu, the son of a rich Indian businessman who comes to America for a degree. Later Babu's death in a car accident and June's death in an abortion make him realise that there is something wrong in his idea of detachment. Initially he had thought that detachment meant inaction but now he realises that detachment meant "right action and not the escape from it" (162). He discovers his innate nature that believes in doing good things for others without any selfish motive. The master of detachment, Sindi, joins Mr. Khemka's business and saves it from an imminent closure. He also learns the lesson that "sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved" (188). Now he gets involved in right action -- action without any selfish motivations. Sindi's quest thus results in the discovery of his better self.

In the second novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, the protagonist finds himself misfit, misplaced and misbegotten in the modern society. He cannot relate himself meaningfully to it. He finds the society of Delhi emotionally dry, intellectually barren and spiritually shallow. On the other hand, he has a strong primitive urge in him. Contrary to the expectations of his family, he pursues a PhD degree in Anthropology. He later joins Delhi university as a lecturer in Anthropology. He selects this subject as he wants to "visit the places they describe, meet the

people who live there, find out about the aboriginalness of the world (Joshi *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* 14). While doing his PhD he lives at Harlem, an area where the primitive people live. His love for the primitive is an inborn propensity. Most often he is infused with the desire to get transported to the tribal world away from the modern city civilisation. During a visit to Bhubaneswar and Konark, when he was fourteen years of age, he felt "This is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of" (125). On another occasion, during an Odissi dance performance he is transported to the 'other world', being enchanted by the deep, sonorous voice of the singers, and the vivacious and sinuous flourishes of the ghungurus. Billy feels that there is an 'other side' as "a great force, urkraft, a ... primitive force" (23). Billy experiences great tension as he is tossed between the primitive and the civilised. The failure of his marriage with Meena Chaterjee complicates the matter as it weakens his bond with the civilised world. Billy finds that the modern civilisation fails to provide him any solace. Finally, he escapes into the land of the primitive tribals -- the saal forests of the Maikala Hills. It is here that his heart which is full of disquiet and agitation finds serenity. He finds himself in perfect equanimity with the elemental forces of nature. Thus Billy discovers his real self by abandoning his so-called civilised life and by embracing the natural life of the primitives.

Joshi's third novel *The Apprentice* narrates the story of Ratan Rathore, who falls from grace to the abyss of immortality and his efforts to save his soul. Ratan is sandwiched between the antithetical philosophies of his father and mother. His father, a Gandhian, believed in idealism, patriotism and sacrifice. He bequeaths the successful career of a lawyer, gives up all his wealth and joins the freedom movement. One day while leading a procession against the Britishers, he is shot dead for disobeying the prohibitive orders of the sergeant. Ratan's mother, on the other hand, is pragmatic and down-to-earth in his approach. She accords the topmost priority to money. She tells Ratan the value of money thus: "It was not patriotism but money ... that brought respect and bought security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed" (Joshi *The Apprentice* 19). Ratan always wanted to "make a mark on the world, a mark as visible and as striking" (23) as his father's. His ambition was "To be good! Respected! To be of Use!" (18).

Ratan feels terribly confused standing at the fork of life. He wants to follow the footsteps of his father by joining the movement himself but the thought of his 'uncertain future' stares large into his face. He decides to leave for Delhi in search of a job. There he comes in contact with the hypocrisy and debauchery that rule the world. He is "examined, interviewed, interrogated and rejected" (29) again and again. The jobs go to those who are pre-selected. His father's friends refuse to help him. Finally, with the help of his roommate he gets a temporary job in the Department for War Purchases. This job provides a launching pad for him. He decides to pursue his 'career'.

Ratan works sincerely and diligently and pleases everybody. At the same time he practices docility. He rises higher in rank and status. For the sake of a secured career, he marries the niece of the superintendent of his office. He turns into a man of ambition. He dives into the abyss of corruption and therefore, gets alienated from his authentic self. During the Indo-Chinese war, he takes a big bribe and clears some defunct war materials. As a result of his act, his closest friend, a brigadier, deserts the battlefield. Besides, Ratan thrusts his country into peril at the time of need. Ratan, without any remorse, pursues his career through "flattery and cunning" (66) and "manoeuvring and downright lying" (67). The Brigadier, just before he is court-martialed on charges of deserting the post, commits suicide. Ratan realises that he has committed a grievous sin and that he should mend his life and redeem his soul. He also feels that his life has become 'a pile of dung' (133). He decides to expiate his sins by dusting the shoes of the devotees in front of a temple. Thus he tries to realise his true self-- a higher moral self.

In the fourth novel, *The Last Labyrinth*, the protagonist Som Bhaskar feels that his life has been divested of some vital essence denying him peace, joy and happiness. The novel delineates his struggles to grapple with his feelings of emptiness and his efforts to come to terms with his self. Som was the scion of an aristocratic family. He becomes a millionaire industrialist at the age of 25. He was endowed with an enormous business acumen. His touch could turn mud into gold. He had a beautiful wife and two wonderful children. It is natural to think that such a person would lead a happy and contented life. But for some strange reason he leads a discontented life. Consequently, at the age of thirty five he turns out to be a "worn out weary man incapable of spontaneous feeling" (Joshi *The Last Labyrinth* 11). Through out the day and night he is found singing "a grey cry," (11) "a strident song," (11) "a rusty cry" (12) and above all the song that orchestrates his his discontent, "I want. I want. I want" (11). He feels dislocated and out of focus. The medicines prescribed by the doctor cannot cure him. The problem with him is that he fails to trace out the reason for his discontent. He takes to boozing and womanising but they cannot cure him. He now feels that his existence is irrelevant and meaningless. The utter sense of failure fills him with sorrow.

However Som cannot be held entirely responsible for his state. There are other factors that have made him what he is today. He is by and large a product of his age. He has been taught to doubt everything. His grandfather was known for his hedonistic pursuits. His father was a scientist. His mother was a woman of religious temper. She had a profound and unwavering faith in the lord. These contradictory impulses tear Som to pieces.

Som is obsessed with Anuradha, the lady love of a businessman named Aftab. In Aftab's haveli, they cool off their physical passions. Som invites her to Mumbai and asks her to stay with him. Their relationship reaches a climactic point. Just then, Som experiences a massive heart attack. Surprisingly, he evades death and recuperates. He then asks Anuradha to come and meet him but she refuses to do so. Incensed by her refusal, he instructs his secretary to buy all the

shares of Aftab's company. Even he himself goes to the temple of lord Krishna at the top of a hill to get the shares. There he comes to know that a miracle had happened after his heart attack. His survival was nothing less than a miracle. At the hill he comes to a circular chamber where a constantly burning flame is worshipped by devotees as God. Other devotees experience bliss at the sight of the flame but it cannot bring any peace to Som's heart. He goes on doubting everything, even God. Gargi advises Som to have faith in God and submit himself at His feet. Som's excessive reliance on reason, intellectual pride, and his belief that science and reason could solve all his problems stand on the way of his realisation. His problems can be solved if he reins his uncontrolled greed and unbridled passion. Besides, he must cultivate forgiveness, renunciation, detachment and a non-possessive attitude.

The fifth and last novel, *The City and The River* is different from all the previous four novels in the sense that here the individual's quest for self has been replaced by the quest of an entire generation or race for a just and honourable existence. The novel delineates the quest of a 'city' for its self in terms of freedom, survival, purification and better alternatives in the wake of the evils perpetrated by its ruler and coterie of ministers.

The city that has grown on the banks of a river is governed by the Grand Master and his coterie of ministers. The different classes of people live at different altitudes with the Grand Master living at the highest altitude. At the lowest altitude, along the bank of the river, live the boatmen. The Grand Master finds the boatmen incomprehensible and stubborn. They are not amenable to persuasion. They live at a subsistence level and are content with only two square meals a day. They considered themselves the children of the river and announced their allegiance to the river only. The grand Master wants to be the "unquestioned lord of these Seven hills" (Joshi *The City and The River* 22). The existence of a prophecy that talks about the coming of a king fuels his ambition. In order to fulfill his ambition, the Grand Master in connivance with the Astrologer, issues a decree whereby the allegiance of the people to the Triple Way or the Way of the Three Beatitudes is made compulsory. The boatmen refuse to accept the conditions laid down in the decree. They also refuse to accept their allegiance to the Grand Master. The Era of Ultimate Greatness, the beginning of which is announced by the Grand Master, turns into an era of gloom and repression. The boatmen are arrested and subjected to untold miseries. On the other hand, the Grand Master along with his coterie remains busy in self-aggrandisement. Finally, a cataclysmic flood sweeps away everything of that city. the same story of suffering continues in the new city that emerges in place of the old city. the novel is open ended. the city's quest for self in terms of freedom and honourable existence, for peace and serenity continues and will continue till some noble ruler rules it and reads the rebellion of the people in the right spirit.

The study reveals that quest for self is a recurrent motif in all the five novels of Arun Joshi. In the first three novels the protagonists Sindi Oberoi, Billy Biswas and Ratan Rathore realize where they all have floundered and make successful attempts to recover their selves. their

quest for self is complete. In the fourth novel the protagonist, Som Bhaskar realises at the end that he needs to have faith in God to fully recover his self. in the fifth novel the city's quest for self continues and will continue till the ruler sacrifices his ego and lust for power over others for the betterment of the city.

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