

**SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND HUMAN LONELINESS IN ARUN JOSHI'S NOVELS****Leena Ganesh**

Arun Joshi feels that the puzzles and contradictions of life cannot but be resolved through faith. That is why, despite all the corruption and degeneration, there are no villains in the world of Arun Joshi. Fear, insecurity and cowardice are the real evils. Arun Joshi has also tried to present in his novels solutions to problems arising out of one's awareness of the purpose or meaning of life. In literature, alienation is mainly attributed to persons living in congested, manufacturing centres, working in Kafkaesque offices, or tending machines which produce things they neither understand nor can value. Earlier it was said that in Arun Joshi's novels social criticism is more implicit. But there are a few institutions and more of Indian Society which might be taken as his targets of attack. For instance, he lays the corruption woven inextricably in the very fabric of society in *The Apprentice* and also mocks at the shallowness of the upper class in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. Arun Joshi adds a new dimension to the genre of Indian Fiction in English by introducing the theme of alienation in his novels. He reveals alienated individuals in environments of crisis and emotional disturbances.

Arun Joshi, a distinguished novelist and short story writer, earned his M.S from MIT, USA. He rose to great heights in the corporate world, after his return to India. His novels are thought-provoking, Joshi being a person of rare sensitivity and one endowed with exceptional talents. His works remain critically acclaimed in India and abroad. More than two decades have passed since he had been conferred with the Sahitya Academy Award.

*The Last Labyrinth* (1981), Arun Joshi's fourth and Sahitya Academy Award winning novel is considered "a new landmark in the tradition of existentialism in Indian Literature". It represents an extension of the theme of his earlier novels *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and *The Apprentice*. Alienation has become a central segment of our society. Asknoff suggests, the process of meaninglessness itself becomes centrally meaningful in Arun Joshi's novels. Recognition followed in the form of huge critical acclaim in India and abroad, especially for his challenging narrative techniques and evocative use of language. He was conferred India's highest literary award – the

Sahitya Academy Award – in 1981 for *The Last Labyrinth*.

The following remarks on Arun Joshi reveal his caliber as a creative writer with great talents: “Joshi ranks among the leading writers... he takes subjects which are pretentious and deals with them in an unpretentious manner.”

(Asia Week)

“Arun Joshi has evolved a style and thematic approach uniquely his own. His prose is at once as felicitous as it is flawless”. (Khushwant Singh)

“In Joshi’s hands we are swept into the unknown...”

(The Times Literary Supplement)

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*: Billy Biswas, a Doctorate in Anthropology awarded at a U.S. university. He is well educated and employed, happily married, a wealthy person enjoying good social status. Yet he is consumed by an inner current of discontent. He becomes more and more restless, feels that he is a misfit in the jet-set world and seeks an opportunity to permanently escape from it. “To attempt to understand is probably even more futile” (7). The most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to understand and to be understood. Billy stands midway between the flamboyant American culture and the tradition bound Indian culture. The fact that Billy hails from the upper strata of Indian Society also adds to some of his problems. Billy does not sink into existential life overnight. The consolidation of identity is the primary psychological task of adolescence.

In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* Arun Joshi is concerned not only with certain social evils deep rooted in civilized societies but also with certain complexities new to mankind. As far as society is concerned justice is done. The final impression one has of Joshi’s story of Billy is that the faceless society is oppressive as well. Individuals like Billy are born to suffer. One’s zeal to reform society can have only limited results. Perhaps death is the real refuge for people like Billy Biswas.

*The Foreigner* is the story of a young man, Surindar Oberoi. He feels a stranger in every environment and he becomes a stranger. Born in England he goes to USA for his studies and later he moves to Kenya and he finally settles in India. His detachment transcends barriers of geography, nationality and culture. It propels him from one crisis to another, sucking in the wave several other people, including June, an attractive American. Thus in *The Foreigner*, Joshi depicts the alienation of

the protagonist Surinder Oberoi. His alienation from the world seems to be similar to that suffered by many existentialist heroes of western literature.

In *The Foreigner*, Joshi makes use of terms and concepts evoking typically Indian Philosophical thoughts in one's mind. The past and the future make no difference to the hero who is in a reduced state of consciousness for the major part of the novel. For him the future would be as meaningless as the past. The title of the novel implies that human beings are foreigners wherever they are on the face of the earth. "Every foreigner student is an ambassador of his country", the professor was saying (43). Arun winked across and thought that he being an ambassador would be a perfectly hilarious one. All the major characters in the novel suffer from a sense of alienation. The hero of the novel, of course is the crown prince of the world of alienated individuals.

Alienation envelopes the hero totally in that while others feel alienated once in a way, he forgets it once in a way. When he is with the people, he understands that there is a temporary bond of love. Like Billy Biswas, Sindi analyzes the reasons for the blissful state of common fellow beings. He comes to the conclusion that common people have the benefit of their delusions protecting them from the lonely meaninglessness of life. Sindi's attitude towards love and marriage is based on his sense of total alienation. One can say that *The Foreigner* tries to gauge the never ending dilemmas of mankind. Though Joshi exposes the constraints of society on individuals he is unable to come out with a definite solution to wake up men from the slumber caused by their identity crisis.

*The Apprentice* depicts the plight of the contemporary man, who is sailing about in a confused society without norms, without directions, without perhaps even a purpose. Arun Joshi has created Ratan Rathor, a unique character, amidst familiar surroundings, to strike home the futility of the race to success. Ratan suffers from discontentment, and which, after a while, becomes a way of life. Ratan becomes tired of body and spirit. *The Apprentice* exposes the cowardice and corruption of his own character in a mock heroic way. Joshi has suggested a remedy to life's problems which is within the easy reach of the common man. Ratan comes to realize that life may well be a zero but it need not be negative. He learns ultimately the lessons of humility and resignation to the will of God, doing what

he can without vanity, without expectations and also without cleverness.

In *The Apprentice* Arun Joshi's social criticism is more direct. He delves deeper into the modern Indian society and analyses its foibles. The narrator moves from a state of innocence to a state of experience. Ratan insists that the listener hear him. Ratan's other aspect is focused on the condemnation of the evils of materialism. He says that the world runs on deals and deals only. He feels restless, depressed and uncomfortable. The whole nation appears to be dreaming, awaiting its doom. The novelist very successfully makes the transition from integrity to corruption appear smooth and credible. Arun Joshi ends the book with an optimistic note. Though the future of the country looks bleak, the young "might yet hold back the tide", says Ratan to the young listeners. The novelist's optimism is revealed in his hope of the younger generations willingness to change, to learn and to sacrifice.

In *Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, the theme of alienation is kept in the background. But in *The Foreigner*, the novelist repeatedly emphasizes that man is alone and his prime source of inner turmoil is his ruthlessness. In *The Apprentice* Joshi's social criticism is directly aimed at the current moral and social environments.

### REFERENCES

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