



"Alone, alone, all, all alone": Mapping the Lone Journey through a Forlorn Universe in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*

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Abstract

The postmodern literature tends to place the individual as a solitary outsider seeking for his own root, his own foot. This is something new as compared to the traditional body of literature; a whole new domain of human experience that involves in it the immediate lived experiences of rootless people groping in darkness. Very much like Coleridge's ancient mariner, this journey of the inhabitants of postmodern landscape remains a solitary one. As a matter of fact, this clash between the popular and the esoteric, between the familiar and the emerging trend shapes the course of the literature in this period. This global shift entered into the Indian literary scenario during the 1960s and 1970s, specifically into the writings of the Post-Independence Indian writers of fiction. Arun Joshi, Anita Desai, Ruskin Bond and Nayantara Sahgal are the prominent figures whose fictional works deal with the themes of alienation, uprootedness, crisis of identity and existential predicament. Arun Joshi's (1939-1993) fictional works specifically attempt at redefining the geography of human soul in search of company as well as meaningful answers to validate their existence. This present paper makes a humble effort to examine Joshi's protagonist in his first novel *The Foreigner* (1968) as a lone wanderer on an equally forlorn landscape.

Keywords: Postmodern, Alienation, Uprootedness, Existential Predicament, Lone Wanderer, Forlorn Landscape.

Introduction

The Post-Independence Indian English literature is largely influenced by the various factors that shape the course of it for the next few decades: the devastating impact of World War II, the trauma of partition, the communal

violence and the resultant political and economic turmoil. The very foundation of the universe was shaken by the invention of the atomic bomb; the entire world was made to stand on a knife's edge. The body of literature, irrespective of the genres, produced during the second half of the 20th century could not escape

the troubled memory of holocaust, genocide, and the fragmentation of empires. All these entered directly into the works of the writers across geographical boundaries. This is how themes and issues like futility, absurdity, meaninglessness and individual as a lonely figure began to crowd the literary landscape of the second half of the 20th century. This landscape can be interpreted as a "cultural and spiritual waste land, a land populated by people who are, physically and emotionally, living a kind of death in the midst of their everyday lives" (Carter & McRae 328).

The western sense of rootlessness and alienation finds its eastern counterpart in the novels of modern Indian novelists. One major cause behind the alienation of this group of writers was that almost all of them came from an urban or semi-urban setting. M.K. Naik's remark in this connection can be used to validate the point:

The factors that make for this alienation experience are rather obvious. First, the spirit of the modern age in general and in its specific Indian context in particular, itself seems to conspire against the artist. In an age of science and technology, writer's stature is generally reduced to the level of a marginal man, and certain aspects of life in post-Independence India cannot but make the artist believe that he hardly belongs. He is deeply affected by the glaring contrast between the values and mores of the days of the freedom struggle and those in present day India. It is a contrast between an era of idealism, selfless service and dedication to a cause and an age of unrepentant materialism, unlimited self-aggrandizement and unabashed pursuit of power. In an age like this, the artist is bound to feel that he is an outsider. (Naik 157).

The characters in the novels of Arun Joshi and Chaman Nahal suffer from a sense of dislocation which is both physical and emotional. Joshi's protagonists like Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner*, Billy Biswas in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and Som Bhaskar in *The Last Labyrinth* operate on a forlorn landscape of fragmented images that make their loneliness almost intolerable. Wherever in the world they go, they always find themselves alone even in the midst of a sea of people; they try their best to make companions and meaningful relations. Unfortunately, they don't find any positive response because of their indifference to their immediate surroundings. Like the ancient mariner of Coleridge, they always find themselves helplessly "Alone, alone, all, all alone/ Alone on a wide wide sea!" (Coleridge 196).

The idea of hero as a lone wanderer in this disjointed universe is a commonplace motif both in 20th century Western literary tradition as well as in its Eastern counterpart. This feeling of being an alien to one's own country, to one's own culture is not merely a physical phenomenon, but a metaphysical one alienating one from one's own self. R.K. Narayan's fictional works like *Swami and Friends*, *Mr. Sampath*, *The Financial Expert* explore these issues before Joshi, though in a limited way. The protagonist of Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*, very much like Sindi in Joshi's *The Foreigner*, suddenly finds himself all alone after getting married to a foreign girl. Again, Joshi's Sindi Oberoi finds his exact counterpart in Srinivas, the protagonist of Kamala Markandaya's novel titled in a Pinteresque manner – *The Nowhere Man*. Srinivas, the 'nowhere man' of the title, still finds himself a solitary outsider on the English soil even after spending fifty English summers.

Arun Joshi, along with Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal, constitutes a significant body of post-Independence Indian fiction. The industrialised, and hence highly mechanized, civilization, the world-wide economic depression have led Joshi (a graduate from the

prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an industrialist and management executive himself) to portray in his *The Foreigner* a world where characters merely reflect the spirit of the age they live in. This is exactly where Joshi's novels are different from the novels of the first-generation Indian English novelists like Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand. One cannot simply find the propagandist anger of Raja Rao in Arun Joshi; neither can one trace biting ironical undertones of R.K. Narayan and burning social issues in the works of Joshi. On the contrary, novels of Arun Joshi deal with existential angst. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that believes that "... we human beings simply exist in a universe that does not have any overarching moral order or meaning. We are not essentially good or bad, we are what we make of ourselves" (Prasad 13). Existential predicament thus accentuates the discourse of alienation and futility of existence from the perspective of a socially and politically constructed state. The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory defines this philosophical phenomenon as –

The term existentialism means 'pertaining to existence'; or, in logic, 'predicating existence'. Philosophically, it now applies to a vision of the condition and existence of man, his place and function in the world, and his relationship, or lack of one, with God.....An important feature of atheistic existentialism is the argument that existence precedes essence (the reverse of many traditional forms of philosophy) for it is held that man fashions his own existence and only exists by so doing, and, in that process, and by the choice of what he does or does not do, gives essence to that existence. (Cuddon 294-95).

These postmodern issues dominate the fictional universe of Arun Joshi consisting of *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last*

Labyrinth (1981) and *The City and the River* (1990).

Arun Joshi's debut novel *The Foreigner*, to a certain extent in an autobiographical vein, depicts the cross-cultural hybridity and the resultant restlessness. The protagonist Sindi Oberoi, very much like Joshi himself, gets stuck in-between this Eastern commitment and the Western influences. During the course of the novel Sindi finds himself as one who inhabits a kind of 'no man's land' and his relationship with the other characters in the novel, particularly with the American girl June, revolves around it. June's observation on Sindi's growing dissociation from himself and his surroundings is worth quoting in this connection: "There is something strange about you, you know. Something distant. I'd guess that when people are with you they don't feel like they're with a human being. Maybe it's an Indian characteristic, but I have a feeling you'd be a foreigner anywhere." (Joshi 33). Sindi's indifference to his surroundings, to his immediate present, even to his near and dear ones can be interpreted as a kind of 'reductio ad absurdum'.

In *The Foreigner*, Joshi portrays his protagonist as a vagabond. Having completed his study abroad, he returns to India, his roots, and starts his professional career as a young industrialist, very much like his creator. But both in his personal and professional life he fails to find the much-needed solace that he constantly chases throughout the world. He was born in Kenya, he roamed through Europe and the USA for academic purposes, and finally returned to India. The four continents (Africa, Europe, America and Asia) constitute the 'nowhere' and it literally makes him the 'nobody'. Neither the short affair with June, nor the fellow Indian student in the USA, Babu who forms the third angle of their disastrous love triangle could not alleviate Sindi's inner anguish and loneliness. When there is no denying the fact that Sindi, throughout the novel, doesn't enjoy any substantial relationship with the other

major characters in the novel, these passing glimpses only highlight his constant fear of standing alone. The flashback technique used by Joshi in the novel acts as a tool to further establish his complete withdrawal from his immediate present.

Joshi in *The Foreigner* has ceaselessly attempted at establishing an emotional bond in-between his readers and his protagonist throughout the novel. Significantly enough, he narrates the events from Sindi's point of view. The readers' assessment of Sindi's character and his inner frustration and fragmentation complement each other, though in an indirect manner. This interconnectedness of Joshi's protagonist and his readers foreshadow the future course of events in the story. Sindi's self-discovery that we are what we choose to be forms the existential question.

Conclusion

The postmodernist literature always voices a distinct departure from the past and, in doing so, it advocates a new trend. In the words of Makarand Paranjape – "A whole generation turned its back on tradition and found itself alienated in the new India." (Paranjape 20). Joshi's mouthpiece in *The Foreigner* inhabited a kind of emotionally barren landscape. Sindi lost his father at the age of four; afterwards his uncle too left him. The 'wrinkled and cracked' memory of his parents made of tired of life and he tried to commit suicide. But even this desperate way of evading reality proved to be futile for Sindi. Thus, his complete surrender (ironically, his actual name reads Surrinder Oberoi) to his own brand of detachment and escapism helps his lone journey to come to its fullest circle. M.K. Naik's observation in this connection is worth quoting:

Arun Joshi's recurrent theme is alienation in its different aspects, and his heroes are intensely self-centered persons prone to self-pity and escapism. In spite of all their weaknesses, they are, however, genuine seekers who strive to

grope towards a purpose in life and self-fulfilment. In his three novels, Joshi attempts to deal with three facets of the theme of alienation, in relation to self, the society around and humanity at large, respectively." (Naik 240).

Thus, the kind of transformation shown towards the end of the novel in Sindi's character is actually an illusion. The more he chases it, the further it recedes, leaving him in a state of perennial void.

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