

RESEARCH ARTICLE



THE APPRENTICE: QUEST FOR CONSCIENCE -A TRUE REFLECTION OF PRESENT TIME

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ABSTRACT

Arun Joshi's third creative venture *The Apprentice* which is inspired by Albert Camus's *The Fall*, depicts the pitiable plight of man in present time, struggling every day to survive in a confused society without norms, without direction, without even perhaps -a purpose. It is a confessional novel wherein the narrator -protagonist unfolds the story of his life in the form of internal monologue. Ratan Rathore, in this novel, probes into his inner life and exposes the perfidy, chicanery, cowardice and corruption of his own character at the mock -heroic level. He is a practical man who, getting his idealism shattered in corrupt society, proposes to survive by sycophancy and practically adapts himself to the mysterious ways of the world.

The novel is both a treatise on current social and political scene and a lament of tormented soul. Although the novel holds a mirror to present society; but at same time it wonderfully suggests some ways to survive in these turbulent times. The wide spread phenomenon of corruption and broken trust lead- many to adopt the ways prevalent in the society and be the one in that crowd; As Ratan has done initially by accepting a bribe to clear sub standard weapons; few adopt the path of crime, suicide and even extended suicide when they confront such situations; only very few gather the courage to face those challenges with truthfulness. Arun Joshi has, in this creative work, suggested a totally unique way to deal with this phenomenon.

Key Words: existentialism, struggle of the conscience, broken trust, extended suicide.

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The Apprentice (1974) probes deeper into the inner consciousness of individual with a view to explore, what the novelist calls, "that mysterious underworld" on one hand and on the other, he tries to focus on the decaying moral values in society. In this novel, he rendered in a confessional form a

telling commentary on the decaying values of a degenerating civilization. It is a story of a young man who out of sheer exhaustion of joblessness and privation is forced to shed honesty and the old world morality of his father to become an 'apprentice' to the corrupt civilization. *The*

Apprentice condemns materialistic values, but in its own unique way. The novelist has used monologue and narration to a boy who is present throughout in just symbolical fashion. According to *World Literature Today*:

The novel is cast in a series of Browning – like monologues, to a boy to whom the protagonist ,burdened with sorrow of ‘wasted life’, lays bare the motives ,aspirations, dilemmas and frustrations of his past.

The protagonist in this novel is a very simple man who comes to the city with lots of hope to get a good and respected job. Contrary to his expectations, in reality he has to face a number of hardships to survive in the city .He is disillusioned in this course of job search. Gradually all his ideals, morals and enthusiasm wane and he started a life full of compromises. Ratan Rathore is a young man whose soul has two distinct aspects- the higher self and the lower self. All through the course of the novel, his soul is torn by these conflicting pulls of lower and higher self, between idealism and realism. In fact ,he is the child of double inheritance. He has taken the patriotic and idealistic values from his father and worldly wisdom from his mother. He is very impressed by his father’s active involvement in the freedom movement of India under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi.

His father gave up his lucrative legal practice to join the freedom struggle .He, too, toyed with the idea of following his father and was willing to sacrifice everything without any promise of reward and success. But his mother a poor and tubercular woman, advises him to earn money: Don’t fool yourself, son.....Man without money was a man without worth. Many things were great in life, but the greatest of them all was money. (Joshi19)She further tells him, It was not patriotism ,but money – that brought respect and bought security .Money made friends Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws, but money was a law unto itself. (Joshi19)Ratan is in a fix regarding his choice between the two conflicting philosophies- one shown by his idealist father and the other by his practical mother.

Like Ratan one is alienated in this phony world, unless one accepts and adjusts to the quilt of the modern society in order to belong. Today, in all walks of life, there is chaos, confusion, corruption, hypocrisy and absurdity. The modern man endowed with superb sensitivity feels powerless and alienated from his own self as well as his surroundings. He seems to be a victim of the modern de-humanized world which does not suit his temperament and all efforts for adjustment prove suicidal to him. He, therefore, takes a bold step to reject the ways of the so-called civilized world and tries his best to discover some meaning of his existence. This scenario presents two sets of individuals –who, after the inner dilemma and struggle decide a totally different course of life – the course leads to positive and creative side to face all situations boldly and the other set of individuals takes recourse to crime, corruption, suicide or the worst form - the cases of extended suicide.

The novel enacts three stages in the human divine comedy of Ratan. The pre-independence period is the dawn, the period of idealism, the phase of innocence, the post –independence India is the broad daylight of experience, the inferno of corruption, the last part the area of expiation, is the door to purgatory. (Prasad 65)

Thus the novel presents a psychological study into innocence, experience and expiation of the protagonist’s life.

Ratan , however ,discovers soon that the honor of being the son of a freedom fighter has no practical value whatsoever in this materialistic world. The people, for whom his father had squandered his life time, forget him within a year. He moves out of his village and goes in search of a job in the metropolis of Delhi .He leaves his home hoping to be worthy of his father and his ideals. But gradually his ideals got tainted in the competitive urban environment. Embittered with a bleak future, without influential connections ,Ratan undergoes a humiliating experience as he is rejected and jeered at while hunting for a job .All his education and intelligence do not help him. Then he learns to keep up

appearances by discarding even ordinary decency and friendship.

Ultimately, with the help of a room-mate at the inn, he gets a job of a temporary clerk in a government office of war purchases. This adds a new dimension to his life. Henceforth his only aim is to make his career:

There have been moments in my life where I see nothing but filth around me. At such times my head would explode with violent, rebellious thoughts. But then I would always calm down, and ask myself: what can be done? Here I am. And here is this filth. What can I do? How can I get away? I am a thick skin now, a thick-skin and a wash out but, believe me, my friend, I too have had thoughts such as these. But what was to be done? One had to live. And, to live, one had to make a living. And how was a living to be made except through careers. (Joshi 39)

Thus he completely alienates himself from his true self and his ideals. Ratan himself describes his own aberrations with a sense of self awareness and objectivity:

I had become, at the age of twenty-one a hypocrite and a liar, in short a sham. I had been insecure before and full of strange fears. But I had never undertaken such sustained, if harmless, deception, for once I had lied about having a job. I had to lie about numerous other things.... I had become a master faker. (Joshi 27)

He is, in fact, shattered by the breakdown of faith. What hurts him is the collapse of the faith. We trust some values, cherish them, and grew with them but all of a sudden find situations just opposite to what we believe.

You believe there is justice in the world; you go about the world for fifty years, this belief sitting in your heart. Then something happens and you go seeking justice. And justice is not there. Or, you assume your wife is faithful, your children love you, your boss fair or that god exists, and then some day proof comes along that nothing is so. That is what hurts. (Joshi 23)

It is this loss of faith that has brought the tendency of apprehensiveness in human nature in present time. The different forms of alienation have passed into the psyche of modern man. The present time is characterized by mechanization, urbanization and growing hostility due to changing values, depersonalization, self-misgivings, delusions, rootlessness, discontent psychological and other maladjustments. All these taken together have made alienation a part of our life. We live in a world plagued by several forms of crisis in which we are even enmeshed in the crisis of our identity and consciousness.

The hopeless mess of life inspires nausea in Ratan. His higher self brings about a change in his behavior. He frequently recollects his father's ideals. He begins to behave as if he was one of the greatest patriots of India. He always talks about the miserable condition of the country. Often he collects donations for the soldiers at the war front. With a view to bring about a change in the existing set up; he also writes an article, in which he holds Indian character solely responsible for the downfall and decay of the country. He has become a person of double face. He criticizes the corrupt practices prevalent in the society, but at the same time he himself was totally engrossed in it. This theme is quite contemporary. Our present day politicians behave the same as Ratan behaved in the novel. There is a wide gap between what they say or preach and what they actually practice. Ratan has quite aptly put the scenario after independence:

Freedom. Freedom. What is freedom but a word, my friend? Freedom of men, of nations. No more than a word. We thought we were free. What we had, in fact, was a new slavery. Yes, a New Slavery with new masters; politicians, officials, the rich, old and new. (Joshi 60, 61)

Being the son of an idealist father and having a spark of idealism amidst ashes of corruption left in him, Ratan feels restless in the unjust world. In the process of these strange bargains, he becomes a hypocrite. His hypocrisy fetches him a car, a bungalow and a good place in society at the cost of peace of his mind. Thus his conscience degenerates totally and suffers a 'crisis of character'. He has

become a person of double face .He criticizes the corrupt practices prevalent in the society but at the same time he himself was totally engrossed in it. There was a wide gap between what he preached and what he practiced. This distinction we find all pervasive in the present time. At every stage Ratan puts up an initial resistance only to discover the futility of his effort like so many others of his kind in contemporary society. Arun Joshi's ironic comment on this aspect of human existence is worth noticing "We sink and we think we are swimming."

With a troubled conscience Ratan goes to Himmat Singh , popularly called Shiekh, who gives him enormous bribe and tempts him into a big bargain. He stooped down to indignities so much that he passes defective war material that causes the death of his own friend, the Brigadier. Various kinds of corruption have hardened him so much that he loses the capacity to be shocked. He justifies his action as follows:

If I have taken a bribe I belonged rather to rule than the exception. Peons were frequently taking bribes. So were government officials and traffic policeman and railway conductors. A bribe could get you a bed in a hospital, a place to burn your dead. Doctors had a fee to give false certificates, Magistrate for false judgments, for a sum of money politicians changed sides, for larger sum they declared wars. Bribery was accepted by factory inspectors, Bank agents and college professors: by nurses, priests and chartered accountants. By all those who acted in public interest. Men took the bribes to facilitate the seduction of their wives, women for seduction of other women. All this I knew and had known for twenty years. (Joshi108)

Ratan resorts to all sorts of corruption prevailing in our society and describes the Indian people as a glorious monument in ruin, a monument of which even the foundations had caught canker.

In spite of whatever a person shows outwardly; he cannot befool his own conscience for long. This is true in Ratan's case as in everybody's case. Even though all the documents which prove Ratan's active involvement in the deal are destroyed yet he remains defenseless in the face of his conscience.

The substandard lot of weapons that he has cleared, in fact, is the cause of defeat of Indian Army ,which in terms of human lives, counts many hundreds of losses. Among them there is the Brigadier, Ratan's old best friend, who deserts the army to avoid death, but in the face of humiliation later commits suicide while waiting for his trial. In his confession, the protagonist proves his friend's innocence. He undergoes a deep crisis which he finally tries to rescue by polishing the shoes of the devotees in the temple every day.

The awareness of stark realities of human existence becomes the measure of Ratan's achievement in terms of realization that 'one must try and not lose heart, not yield at any cost, to despair'.(Joshi143)and that there is nothing wrong to make a second start as it is never too late to mend. With this positive realization, he appears to be an affirmative kind of existential figure and the personal value he discovers for himself surely lends meaning to his existence. However, frozen, petrified our civilization may be, there is hope as long as man is willing to learn, as Ratan himself has learnt, in the same way he wants his listeners to learn. He hopes that the younger generation "might yet hold back the tide"

The realization by the young is possible only when they have integrity. This integrity is tested in the fires of existential choice. Ratan has lost self and felt the anguish of loss. His existential decision to recover the lost self through an act of penitence reveals the need to realize and prize one's integrity. The novelist purposely and of course, correctly ends his novel with a dawn which is both inward and outward though it is a cold one. But no matter a dawn, after all is a dawn:(Joshi144)

In the present time, we see that corruption permeates every inch of life. People flourishing on graft and deception and no harm are done to them. This makes one believe that the theory of cause and effect is obsolete and lost its value totally. So Ratan Rathore as a true representative of modern man is – cunning, deceptive and easy-going. Joshi depicts the inner emptiness of protagonist quite dexterously. At places the work becomes more a treatise on the present world than a fiction. At the same time quite wonderfully the writer has suggested that more and more money cannot fetch peace of mind and real

happiness for us. In spite of all the luxuries and enjoyments in Bombay, Ratan is not happy. He feels an inner void: The more money I accumulated, the more I was dissatisfied and the more I was determined to "enjoy" life. And all the time I thought of death. (Joshi 85) The novel commands the value of humility and self-purification. In this sense the novel is a study of the loss and retrieval of one's soul. As he stated himself:

I never enter the temple. I am not concerned with what goes on in there. I stand at the doorstep and I fold my hands, my hands smelling of leather and I say things. Be good, I tell myself. Be good, Be decent. Be of use. Then I beg forgiveness. Of a large host: my father, my mother, the brigadier, the unknown dead of the war, of those whom I harmed, with deliberation and with cunning, of all those who have been the victim of my cleverness, those whom I could have helped and did not.(Joshi 143).....And during the day whenever I find myself getting to be clever, lazy, vain, indifferent, I put up my hands to face and there is smell of a hundred feet that must at that moment be toiling somewhere and I am put in my place.(Joshi 143)

The cause of alienation and inner emptiness of Ratan is neither the rootlessness of Sindi nor the unusual urge of Billy but the compelling force of civilized society that shatters his idealism and turns him cynical and even hypocrite. The novel presents a contrast between idealism and realism. If we express the same in modern terminology the contrast between the VIRTUAL and ACTUAL that is the cause of number of existential problems in present time.

All the points touched by Joshi in this novel are concurrent. We find politicians interfering with the Army in the novel. Brigadier came out of a conference and felt depressed and dejected. In present day situation the scenario is no different. All the war strategies were /are being decided by the politicians and civilian bureaucrats - they were to call the tune and soldiers had only to dance to it.

The novel exhibits that fraud was committed on the honour of the nation and the soldiers were betrayed. Hundreds of lives were lost but the

ministers were blind to it. This is the one example how few privileged people play with the honour and security of the nation .The need of this present hour in the words of Ratan Rathore:

That, I imagine, would be one way of putting it . I would be happy if I could do what I do as best as I can, without vanity and without expectations and also without cleverness. "Getting along" will not do nor would "I'll see the next time" or "Let me first know what is in it for me". Then there is one another thing my father used to say, something in fact that his father had told him. Remember ,he would say ,whatever you do touches someone somewhere.(Joshi 143)

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