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## HUMAN PREDICAMENT AND MEANINGLESSNESS OF LIFE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ARUN JOSHI'S NOVEL *THE FOREIGNER*

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### ABSTRACT

Of all the Indian English Novelists of today, Arun Joshi can truly be said to gain recognition. Joshi came into limelight with the publication of his very first novel, '*The Foreigner*' which appeared in 1968. Joshi's primary concern is with man's anguished effort to find moorings for himself in the tumultuous sea of life. What is presented in Arun Joshi's novels is not the common place East-West encounter but a poignant picture of 'Angst'. The novel meets the needs of the modern world more boldly than poetry or drama. The novel *The Foreigner* reflects both constructive and disintegrating phases of contemporary society. Recently there has been a growing interest among the Indian novelists in English to present the experience of the modern predicament. As the novels after 1950s began to shift from the public to the private sphere and began to delineate the individual's quest for the self in all its varied and complex forms and his problems and crises, Arun Joshi is in search for new themes *renounced the larger world in favour of the inner man* and has engaged himself in a search for the essence of human living. (124-125)

**Key Words:** Anguished, angst, private sphere, contemporary society, problems, crises, inner man, human psyche.

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### INTRODUCTION

Joshi's novels are based on actual human experience. He is not content to restate experience but he feels a need to shape it, a need to discover reality which is hidden in the actuality of his own life. Joshi is concerned with modern man and his attempt to understand the labyrinth of life. Joshi's novels may be considered a revelation of a world where man is confronted by the self and the questions of his existence. In all his novels, man's search is directly at the inscrutable region of uncertainty and inscrutability. Essentially, Arun Joshi is a novelist of psychological insight as Joshi delves deep into the inner recesses of human psyche where

he finds instincts and impulses at work. He seeks a process of the apprehension of reality which may lead him to the world of the core of the truth of man's life where he realizes man's uniqueness and loneliness in an indifferent and inscrutable universe. Critical Analysis

Arun Joshi differs from the rest of Indian-English fiction writers in his handling of certain themes. His novels delineate more of human problems than issues arising out of regional loyalties. He is more emphatically concerned with the search for the essence of human living and the need for the acculturation of man to establish him

back to his roots, self and peace. O.P Bhatnagar in *The Art and Vision of Arun Joshi* says:

A certain awareness of man's rootlessness and the consequential loneliness and anxiety is the key note of Arun Joshi's unique vision of the predicament of modern man in contemporary Indian English fiction. His awareness is also focused on the evils of man's material concerns.

Arun Joshi, as an outstanding novelist of human predicament, has charted in all his four novels the inner crisis of the modern man. The modern man has to contact problems relating to his self. Actually, man faces the problems of meaninglessness. Edmund Fuller in *Man in Modern Fiction* states:

Man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problem...a conviction of isolation, randomness and meaninglessness in his way of existence (3)

The problem of meaninglessness is so pervasive that it threatens to corrode every sphere of human life as man fails to perceive the very purpose behind life and the relevance of his existence in a hostile world. The reasons being as M.K.Nayak observes,

The prevailing economic conditions culminating in the abject poverty of the masses and the economic squeeze of the middle class on the one hand, and the overgrowing affluence of the newly rich on the other, the drag of social conventions and traditions, the fast changing value system consequent upon the impact of rapid modernization accruing from industrialization and urbanization, the inter generational tensions engendered with changing ethos-all these make increasing and often disturbing demands on the individual an contribute in their ways to his sense of meaninglessness of life (42).

Joshi's novels are built around dark, dismal experiences of the soul. He is stimulated into writing to explore *that mysterious underworld which is the human soul* (8). Joshi's sensibility has the terrible existentialist vision. He himself admits his influence of Camus, the existentialist. One can say with conviction that the central subject of Arun Joshi is

the dark night of the soul and his most memorable fictional creations are haplessly lost, lonely questers after the absurd in the benighted underworld of the inner, dark recesses of existence. In short, he sees lives as labyrinths-hopeless mazer, irretrievably lost at once intent and lost.

Joshi is a connoisseur of souls divided against them. He got his higher education in United States in Engineering from the University of Kansas with further specialization in industrial management at the M.L.T He also worked in a mental hospital in the states. This experience was bound to create a strong impression on his young and sensitive mind. That is why, the chief protagonists in all his novels are described as possessing an innerlife within the underworld of the soul divided against itself, its aspirations and conflicting urges turned on the will and action. Joshi's reputation as a novelist has been rising since the publication of his very first novel *The Foreigner* (1968), where he explores the individual's anguished consciousness of being isolated from the whole apparatus of social convention and ritual with the protagonist called Sindhi Oberoi who finds himself in the predicament of an outsider-an Indian by origin, brought up in Kenya, educated in London and America.

*The Foreigner* a compelling work of fiction, moves through the maze of the past and the present and penetratingly records a grim but productive encounter with life. It also has a palpable existentialist orientation. According to Meenakshi Mukerjee *it is the first Indian English novel to deal with the predicament of loneliness without compromise and without clichés*: (103) Meenakshi Mukherjee describes the hero as a perennial outsider, who is always lonely and ill at ease in the world in which he has to live. *The Foreigner* takes us to the lower depths of human sufferings and the inferno of existential agony which intensify through his subsequent works. The novel enacts what Spengler defines as 'the crisis of the present' in the story of Sindhi Oberoi, the protagonist who is a product of the crossroads of the West and the East.

Sindhi Oberoi is the central character as well as the narrator of the story. It deals with the life of Sindi, a young man, in search of life. Sindi was a perfect foreigner. He was not only a foreigner to the

two cultures between which he shuttled but also to his soul. He was an orphan both in terms of relations and his emotional roots. He was brought up by his uncle who was settled in Kenya and believed that *to love is to invite others to break out heart* (69). Being the son of a mixed parentage i.e., his mother a British national and his father a Kenyan Indian, Sindi knows that he doesn't belong anywhere. His entire view of life and responses are coloured by his childhood deprivation of love from his parents. Therefore he entertained a deep sense of insecurity, unreality and impermanence about things. His definition of his life is that of a lone journey in total darkness where twenty five years are largely wasted in search of wrong things in wrong places. (80)

Sindi is educated in London where he meets Anna, a minor artist separated from her husband. He has an affair with this Soho artist, who yearns neither for him nor anybody but 'for her lost youth'. Later he is deeply involved with Kathy, an English housewife who hungers for adulterous love. She leaves Sindi after carrying on with him for a few weeks and goes back to her husband because *she thought marriage was sacred and has to be maintained at all costs* (144). This attitude of hers hurts him more than he cared to admit, and he makes up his mind to keep his emotional self inviolate, no matter what physical relationships he may pass through. The novel opens with the scene set in a morgue where Sindi identifies the dead body of his friend Babu Rao Kempka, who had been killed in a car accident on Mass Turnpike. Subsequently he goes to June and over a cup of coffee in a restaurant breaks the news of Babu's death in a car accident in Boston.

News of Babu's death is conveyed to his family, Mr.Kempka and Sheila Babu's father and his sister. When Sindi visits them he finds that they have accepted the news with a calm resignation. During his stay in Delhi, Sindi is often assailed by Sheila, Babu's sister and his employer's daughter, with questions about the death of her brother Babu for whom she had a great passion. While he evades her queries he feels haunted by Babu's ghost and recapitulates events in Boston in which he, June and Babu were intricately involved. Sindi, doing an engineering degree in Boston, meets June Blyth an

attractive young America, at student's party. He has a short lived but passionate love affair with June. As Sindi is a loof and alone, he develops a sense of detachment not knowing about the real affection, as he was brought up by an uncle whom he neither loved nor detested. Being aloof to his surroundings and not interested in getting involved with any long term attachments, he rejects June's love and her proposal of marriage. He considers involvement to be the root cause of all problems.

Sindi points out to her the futility of trying to build a permanent relationship in marriage when impermanence is the natural order of life. June, being a sensitive girl, turns to Babu, who comes to America to study engineering and who considers America to be a dreamland, where he can have free sex and live without his father's admonitions. Babu falls in love with June and ultimately his emotional involvement leads him to his death. His moral inhibitions and orthodox background restrain him from marrying June. The Babu-June marriage does not come off when Babu realizes that June has been sleeping with Sindi and perturbed by this, drives himself to death.

Sindi during his stay in America meets June Blyth and they fall intensely in love, but much as he loves her, he does not react favourably to her proposal of marriage. He rejects June's proposal because he believed that *marriage was more often a lust for possession than anything else. People got married just as they bought new car. And then they gobbled each other up* (60) Because he entertains a deep sense of insecurity, he confesses that *I was not the kind of man one could love; I had learnt that long ago.*(34) June being a free, frank, uninhibited, generous and human person loves Sindi and tries to make him see that marriage will do them both good, but Sindi refuses to marry her fearing involvement, and maintains that marriage is one big illusion that has been compounded by society. June Blyth turns her attention to Babu after she is turned down by Sindi. Sindi being a tireless seeker of truth continues *wandering through the maze of existence looking for a solution to the seemingly intractable problems of life.*(144).

Babu being the son of a prosperous business magnate goes to Boston for higher training

in engineering. Being the son of an industrialist he was brought up on the hygienic diet of morals, and was expected to get properly educated in order to look after his own business concerns. Babu falls in love with June Blyth the moment he sees her in Sindi's company and he tells her about his wealth and grandeur at home. His soaring love for her later gets solidified into a proposal of marriage. Their marriage is postponed due to Babu's repeated failures at the examinations and his subsequent expulsion from the University. June accepts the marriage proposal from Babu because Sindi rejects her proposal of marriage and chiefly because she feels that she will be helping him and be useful to him. Because, June Blyth is *one of those rare persons who have a capacity to forget themselves in somebody's trouble* (97).

Sindi realizing that Babu is infatuated with June is jealous of Babu Rao Kempka but not ready to take the responsibility of marriage. Babu because of his moral inhibitions and orthodox background fails miserably in his relation with June and consequently drives her to her ruin and himself to his tragic death. Realizing that due to his detachment and indifferent attitude he has caused tragedy in the lives of Babu, who has driven himself to death and June who has died of abortions, Sindi leaves Boston blaming himself for both their deaths.

I was seized with the problem of once again putting together all that had happened to me and coming to grips with life. For twenty years it had moved whichever way life had led me. It had learnt much on the way. I had learnt to be detached from the world, but not from myself. That is when the fatal error was made that ultimately led to Babu's death and then to June's death. (165).

On reaching Delhi Sindi accepts a job in Mr. Kempka's firm where he meets Muthu and other co-workers. Sindi gains the human perspective and understands the meaning of familial relationship in the Indian context when he becomes close to Sheila. Sindi takes up a job in Mr. Kempka's factory and notices the kind of life the affluent in India are leading. He compares the house of Mr. Kempka to that of Muthu's a worker's house wherein it makes

him aware of the poverty amidst which those people live. Sindi is deeply touched by the squalor of the places and the wretchedness of Muthu's lot. The poverty, the deprivation and the helplessness of the workers make Sindi take cudgels for them. Sindi finds that Mr. Kempka is obsessed with unscrupulous accumulation of wealth. He also realizes that Mr. Kempka had sent Babu to America for higher education in the hope that Babu, on his return, will be an asset to the family's social status.

Though not a young man in a hurry, Sindi seeks direct encounter and firsthand experience of life. The appalling living conditions of Muthu's large family awaken him from the detachment which was the result of the tragedy in the lives of Anna, Babu and June. Being awakened from his stupor he is spurred into a concrete, purposeful action. He takes over Kempka's firm and advises the employees to totally ignore Kempka and his daughter and launches the economy drive in which every employee is involved as Mr. Kempka lands himself in jail and his firm is sealed by the income tax people due to the dishonest business ethics. Devoting himself to the service of the poor and exploited workers of Kempka's firm Sindi leaves behind his detached self and realizes that real detachment is right action.

Sindi's sufferings are manifestations of a spiritual crisis which all sensitive people have to face today. His various experiences in life, however leave him with unanswered questions, as he observes *like swollen carcasses strewn on river banks after a flood* (120) He is keen on knowing his purpose in life, a knowledge of which is essential before he can make earnest efforts to fulfill it. Sindi is always lonely an ill at ease in the world in which he has to live. His loneliness is apparent to anyone who meets and talks to him. In their very first encounter June tells him:

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 everywhere. (29)

Sindi born in Kenya was brought up by his uncle in Kenya and had his early education in Kenya and later

in England and finally in America. Having no permanent roots he is detached from all the places he has resided in.

He feels that I wondered in what way if any, did I belong to the world that roared beneath my apartment window. Somebody had begotten me without a purpose and 50 far I had lived without a purpose....Perhaps I felt like that because I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if I had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter! It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner. My foreignness lay within me and I couldn't leave myself behind wherever I went (55).

After joining in Mr.Kempka's firm even Sheila tells him that *you are still a foreigner, you don't belong here* (122) A person so alienated and rootless as Sindi was bound to become cynical misogynistic and detached. He himself confesses that, *I was cynical and exhausted, grown old before my time, weary with my own loneliness.* (13) and finds that he has wasted twenty five years searching for wrong things in wrong places. It was part of his cynicism and sense of alienation that he was utterly indifferent as to what he studied and what profession he followed. Sindi regarded love and marriage only as a lust for possession. He believed that love that wanted to possess was more painful than no love at all:

One should be able to love without wanting to possess, otherwise you end up by doing a lot more harm than good. One should be able to detach oneself from the object of one's love. (60).

He maintains the attitude that in most marriages, love soon ended and hatred took its place. *The hand that so lovingly held mine would perhaps someday ache to hit me.*(63) Once when Sindi's relationship with June grew from friendship the barriers of detachment he had erected started to crumble and his wish of non involvement started to dissolve, he tried valiantly to resist, but on June's proposal for marriage was rejected fearing that he would be possessed. He feels that *I was afraid of possessing anybody and I was afraid of being possessed and marriage meant both.*(91)

He cherished the false notion he could ever continue to remain free and uninvolved. Sindi on coming to India and joining Mr. Kempka's firm comes into contact with Muthu a worker in Mr.Kempka's employee. Sindi was deeply touched by the squalor of the place and the wretchedness of Muthu's lot. On the request made by Muthu and other workers, to take charge of Mr. Kempka's business and to save them from starvation Sindi becomes not only interested in involvement, but involved himself to better the lot of the downtrodden. Sindi along with the willing co-operation of the staff effected several economies and set all kinds of wheels in action with the result the business soon showed visible signs of looking up. Sindi realizes that *detachment lies in actually getting involved.* (25).

The cynical exponent of non-involvement became overnight a warmhearted and purposeful man of action. Sindi takes upon himself the onerous responsibility of saving Mr.Kempka's disintegrating empire, and he concentrates on decisive action. He does not feel amused by the random absurdity of his present involvement, and yet he has learnt plentifully from his experience that it is involvement, and not detachment, that can and does redeem man. Sindi's cynicism and detachment are only a thin veneer at the surface interlinked with inclemencies of life's weather. M.K. Naik comments that Sindi's transformation from a detached person into a committed individual is *neither adequately motivated nor prepared for earlier and that the ending of the novel thus appears to be botched up* (230).

From the novel one can see that Sindi feels himself a foreigner in any place he resides and tries to find meaningfulness in life throughout. Only after he comes to India and meets Muthu and the other common people does he feel a sense of involvement and tries to protect the common people from the lonely meaninglessness of life. His existential drifting over the surface of the earth and his experimentation with self only intensify his dismal loneliness and acute sense of meaninglessness of life. He tries to seek, finally in involvement a solution to his problems.

Reading Joshi's novels is not a smooth experience. Reading his novels is to be rather disturbed emotionally. He is different from other novelists. Madhusudan Prasad in *Cornering Arun Joshi :A Critical Perspective on the Last labyrinth* says:

Not being able to escape the infectious impact of Kafka, Camus, Sartre and Bellow, Joshi dramatises in his novels some thought-provoking existentialist themes such as rootlessness and detachment (in *The Foreigner*), quest for better alternatives in this ostentatious materialistic world (in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*) and guilt consciousness and self realization (in *The Apprentice*) highlighting our glorious cultural heritage as well as imperishable moral and spiritual values. All his protagonists Sindi Oberoi, Billy Biswas, Ratan Rathor and Som Bhaskar, are afflicted by existentialist angst, agony and restlessness that propel them in to a psychic odyssey in quest of spiritual moorings and ultimate meaning of life. (9)

Joshi belongs to the tradition of existentialist writers like Camus, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Kafka, Marcel, Jasper, Buber, Paul Tillich, Beckett, Saul Bellow and others. He has himself confessed. *I did read Camus and Sartre, I liked the Plague and read the Outsider. I might have been influenced by them.* (78) Joshi like the other existentialists, is deeply concerned with man's plight and imbrolios engendered by alienation and its concomitant angst and agony. But he differs from the Western existentialist writers in the sense thus in him the existentialist dilemma, the anguish of alienation and the absurdity of situation never remain the final predicament. His central motif is quest and all his character are questers and seekers.

Among the major women characters in the fiction of Joshi, June has been depicted as one of the stereotyped woman who has no high ambition in her life. What she really wants is to fall in love with anyone of Asian students, who comes to Boston for Higher studies and to get married and to beget children and to lead a normal life like any other woman in the world. Because she is free, frank

and generous and wants to be of some use to others falls in love with Sindi who is badly in need of sympathy, love and kindness. When Sindi turns down her marriage proposal she shifts her attention towards Babu. When they are planning to get married, Babu comes to know the fact that June is not loyal to him. As he is a typical Indian man he gets infuriated when June reveals the fact that she has shared her bed with Sindi. Thus, her deliberate attempts to belong to someone and marry him and settle down with him fails as both of her lovers let her down. June dies and her death is thematically significant in the novel because it is because of her death which makes Sindi go to India where he is able to realize that his notion about detachment is wrong and atlast he understands the real meaning of detachment and non-involvement.

Conclusion:

The protagonists search for some kind of a meaning in life is the central themes of all Arun Joshi's novels. The two novels: (*The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*) are about the quest of the protagonist and are built around the theme of human loneliness for an incessant search for a meaningful existence of life. Thus Arun Joshi stands different from other novelists whose protagonists are in endless search for the redemption of human soul that they lost once and for all in this materialistic world. Joshi's angst - ridden protagonists are relentlessly in search of a way to face with dignity of life which is ugly, inescapably painful and always unsatisfying. Ultimately, however, they are able to arrive at some form of personal affirmation.

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