



The Journey of Self-Discovery in Arun Joshi's novel the Foreigner

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Abstract:

Art is the reflection of life in its purest form, an expression of truth and beauty which remains unnoticed until brought to our attention by some sensitive human soul. It is true that good literature knows no nationality, nor is subjected to any bounds. It is occupied chiefly with the elementary passions and emotions-love, hate, joy and sorrow, fear and faith, which constitute an essential part of human nature. The more it reflects these emotions, the more surely does it awaken response in men of every race and nation.

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Arun Joshi is one such prolific Indian fiction writer who takes these fundamental passions and emotions as the subject matter in his works. He discusses the dilemma and rootlessness of his heroes in the post-independent socio-cultural environment. He recognizes a reality beyond the mere phenomenal world, a reality which lies hidden in the actuality of his own life. He reveals a world where man is confronted by the self and the questions of his existence. His search is directed to the inner recess of human psyche and he enters into that mysterious region of uncertainty. His novels are concerned with the moral and spiritual problems that beset man today-loneliness, estrangement, despair and anxiety are some of his common themes. The present paper is an attempt to examine the novel, the Foreigner and explore the fundamental issues of estrangement, detachment, anxiety and self discovery for ultimate meaning of human life. The focus of the paper will be to show how the central protagonist, Sindi Oberoi overcomes his initial nihilistic inner crisis to the final existential realization of the meaning of life through the continuous exploration self with respect to the outside world.

Introduction:

Born in 1939, Arun Joshi had a bright academic career, obtained an engineering degree from the University of Kansas and a degree of Industrial Management from MIT Cambridge, Massachusetts. He is one of the most prominent Indo-English writers of Post colonial Era of Indian Literary arena. He has written five novels and a collection of dozen short stories, embedded with widened thematic and stylistic scopes. The publication of The Foreigner (1968) and The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1971) revealed the making of a brilliant novelist in him, which was followed by The Apprentice (1974) and a collection of his short stories under the title The Survivor which was published in 1976. His next novel The Last Labyrinth (1981), won him



the Sahitya Academy award in 1982. His last novel *The City and the River* was published in 1990. At last his unfortunate death in 1993 cut short his literary career.

Arun Joshi is a novelist writing in a contemporary context. His novels are structured in the native socio-cultural situations and deal with the moral and spiritual problems of contemporary Indians. His protagonists suffer from spiritual vacuum, rootlessness, evils of materialism, identity crisis and loss of faith in human value. They grow out of alienation and sense of non-belonging mostly journeying into different parts of the world through the confusion of present time. For Joshi, the anguish of alienation and absurdity of situation never remains the final predicament. His Sindi Oberoi is a foreigner born in Kenya to Indian parents, educated in England and USA and settles down in India. In the course of his life, he makes relationships with a series of women but with June he is brought face to face. His hypocrisy, cowardice nature, vanity and stupidity all are exposed. The death of June and Babu deepens his sense of alienation and detachment, but in the process, he also apprehended the real meaning and purpose of his life. He, through the mask of detachment comes to know the real connotations of existence.

Discussion:

The *Foreigner* is the story of a young man Sindi Oberoi, who is detached, almost estranged and who sees himself as an alien wherever he goes or lives. In the very beginning of the novel, we find that he is born to Indian parents in Kenya, got his early education from west Africa and higher education from UK and USA. His parents had been killed in an air crash near Cairo, when he was just four years old. He while living in Kenya decided to commit suicide (12). To avoid this catastrophe, his educated uncle propelled him to study in America. It is there that the most of the events take place. His character is revealed mostly through the different relationships which he developed while living in different parts of the world. His detachment transcends barriers of geography, nationality and culture. He comes in contact with various characters living either in the promising cities of America, United Kingdom or primitive and more spiritual land of India. In the process of his growth, he ponders over the fundamental question of man's insatiable quest for meaning in life. His empirical experience with the real life makes him a firsthand observer of cultural ethos, beliefs and the way of life practiced in various parts of the world. His character in this sense is larger than the life, that is, he has the experience of living in four different countries without having a special allegiance or affiliation to any of these. So, in a way he has a universe within 'himself,' a microcosm of macrocosm. His observation of the surrounding world is unbiased and empirical in nature. He has in him, the profound philosophy of existence, spiritual/mystic message of Vedas and the hollowness of the western civilization. The protagonist's personal quest for ultimate purpose of life is sharply contrasted with the spiritual barrenness and degeneration of the postmodern world. The novel cross examines the issues of naturalism with the vacillation of modern world. The avarice and materialism of the post-industrialized world becomes a backdrop to contemplate on more important issues of spiritualism



or the unfortunate condition of the proletariats. In fact it is a novel that deals with the myriad of contemporary issues- the modern man's obsession with the self, a spiritual quest for meaning, a picture gallery of living condition of working class people, a paranoid tale of moral degradation of present civilization, the alienation and existential anguish, the eternal and everlasting justice and an empirical experimentation of how to overcome spiritual barrenness and futility of life.

The metaphoric title, 'Foreigner' connotes much more than the apparent meaning. It is not just the depiction of a person who comes from a foreign country or lives in a foreign land. In reality it symbolises a dense and rich creation, uncovering fundamental issues of human existence- the hybrid self, the absurdity of human condition, and the meaninglessness of the freedom, existence and responsibility. The central protagonist, Sindi, is a stranger to himself because he is isolated from his worldly endeavours and customs. He does not question the existence of God like existentialist philosophers, but simply seeks the meaning of existence within the established laws and rules of the universe.

The protagonist of the novel recurrently examines self with respect to the society. The other characters like Arun, Karl, Sheila and Mr. Khemka merely perform the triggering role to arouse a sea of responses from him. The only character of June is drawn in such a way to keep him contemplating on the issues of existence, humanity and the institutions of marriage and social bonding. It is mostly through her vision of life and firm belief on the fact that 'existence precedes essence' that Sindi is able to realize the purpose of life. Sindi is initially seen as a nihilist who believes only on the 'nothingness' as permanence. He regards his existence as a vehicle of death "I suppose I existed only for dying, so far as far I knew everybody else did the same thing" (56). The question of human choice and freedom always remind him of the futility of the existence. "You are never free how can anybody take away your freedom when you never had it in the first place. All freedom is illusion you had no choice in your birth nor do you even choose your death. And in between is a vast expanse of lawless sands that pile up where the wind blows" (67, 68). He does not have a firm faith on himself as a free agent. His soul is like a bedraggled beachcomber that had searched the beaches of the world and found nothing (69). The institutions of marriage did not lure him instead it merely looked as the commodity like the engineering gadgets meant for replacing poor working class people. "Marriage is more often a lust for possession than anything else. People get married just as they bought new cars" (60). He is lost in his own world and is afraid of possessing anybody or being possessed by anyone through the acts of love and marriage. (91). He is a lonely creature of the modern world who enjoys favours of various ladies without even bothering of the consequences of his acts. His alienation and self obsession is so intense that he always lives in the past and believes that "he has wasted twenty-five years in search of wrong things in wrong places" (80). He has lost twenty-five years in search of peace but has got nothing out of it except his ten-stone body that had to be fed four times a day, twenty eight times a week. His constant broodings on the meaninglessness of the existence and the ultimate death makes him a lonely wanderer of the world. He is surprised to



notice people behaving in an optimistic tone in a seemingly purposeless world. “Death wipes out everything for most of us away. All that is left is a big mocking zero.” (92). He has the utter nihilistic view of the life “it is all so meaningless, so utterly meaningless. All we do is get into bed...we are alone you and I. that is the problem. And our aloneness must be resolved from within” 107).

In the latter part of the novel, we observe an extraordinary regeneration of his character. This transformation comes from the empirical experiences he had gained by travelling and keenly observing different people with varied view points. It was June whose exuberant and lively nature revealed him secrets of existence. She lived for others ignoring her own self for the cause of humanity. June was essentially so uncomplicated a person that whenever she saw somebody in pain she went straight out to pet him rather than analyzing it a million times like the rest of us. (97). Her active spirit taught him the hidden truths of life. Sindi was like in a long coma, as somebody had given him a big dose of anesthesia. (123). When he realized what his purpose in life is, he began to work among the poor factory workers in India. He soon grew accustomed to the wounds. He gained his will power through the realization that past cannot be redeemed. (123). He wanted to live without desire and attachment that was his real delusion. “I wanted the courage to live as I wanted; the courage to live without desire and attachment. I wanted peace and perhaps a capacity to love. I wanted all these. But above all, I wanted to conquer pain”. (120). In his whole life he wanted to know the meaning of life but all his classroom didn’t tell him about it. He ultimately decided to travel the world and observe things as they are. He gained much experience and as such came close to the reality. (142). He spent a whole year wandering through the maze of his existence looking for an answer. This answer came through Hindu mysticism “no birth and death are real. They are the constants. All else is variable. In the rest you see what you want to see. According to the Hindu mystics there is reality beyond all this”. (145). Sindi’s encounter with pain and despair taught him the real meaning of life. He used to live a cowardice life of self attachment and social detachment. He came to the realization that detachment was not actually inaction but consisted of right action and not an escape from it. He was in a delusion that world offers nothing to realize one’s dream. He observes,

“For the first time I became aware of despair that had so long enveloped my being like a fish, I had always been unaware of it. I saw myself as I had always been. An uprooted young man living in the latter half of the twentieth century who had become detached from everything except himself. Where Kathy and Anna had taught me to be detached from others, June’s death finally broke my attachment to myself. It was here that my hope lay.” (164).

Similarly, Sindi’s empirical experience with the real life taught him how to live a purposeful life. He learned from his past mistakes. He was a prisoner of his own world and paid a heavy prize for his initial transgression. In many ways, he realized that past had been a waste, but it had not been without its lessons. His journey had been long and tedious but he knew that there would be



useful tasks to be done in future. He no longer feels remorseful of his past sinful activities and believes that through eternal justice his soul is being redeemed. Contemplating on his present state, he says:

“But in the inner recesses of my mind the trial went on. Each day the judges met and examined the witnesses. My parents, my uncle, my lovers, Babu and June, their parents, and finally myself, one by one all were called by the invisible judges and asked to give their evidence. I felt as if some indefatigable surgeon was cleaning up my soul with the sharp edge of his scalpel” (165)

So, Sindi Oberoi’s self discovery revealed him the absurdity of escaping real world. He finds meaning in sharing the distress of somebody other than his own self. He is not going to realize his own being in marrying June but save her being from falling into pieces. He is taught by his empirical consciousness and is governed by the material laws of the universe in terms of time and cause and effect.

Conclusion:

The Foreigner highlights the biggest curse of the modern civilization – spiritual bankruptcy. The main reason for this is that man has become self-centered. He does not want to think beyond himself. This has denied him the opportunity to be linked with the greater good of the greatest number. He is redeemed only when he begins to think and act beyond himself. This is the message of Arun Joshi’s novel, *The Foreigner*. So long as Sindi is confined to himself, he is in the condition of self doubt and self torture. He even rejects love offered by June. He, in fact, wants to love without any life-long commitment. Such an attitude is bound to fail to bring happiness to him. It results in deaths of the woman he loves as well as the man who also becomes a victim of Sindi’s attitude. Sindi does learn the lesson of his life but after losing much in life. It is only when he comes out of himself that he gains peace and mission in life. When he tries to revive the business of Khemka it is not for himself but for the poor workers of Khemka who shall lose the only source of livelihood that they have. So it is his selflessness that ultimately gives Sindi’s life a meaning.

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