“The strength of the novel lies in the ease of Joshi's style and the authenticity of his scenes...”

- Indian Express

CHAPTER - 4

ALIENATION IN THE APPRENTICE
CHAPTER - IV

ALIENATION IN "THE APPRENTICE"

The hero of this novel Ratan Rathor presents the case of a man who had lost his identity in becoming one with the society. He is caught between his loyalties for his father and Himmat Singh. The Apprentice brings out the anxiety, rootlessness and isolation suffered by Ratan Rathor, which very much leads to his alienation from himself.

Ratan Rathor learns to keep up appearances and discharges decency and friendship under the guidance of his mother. But soon he sees into his degradation and realizes that the approach to life need not be negative. Instead, being of use to others and their good may resolve the inner sense of futility and alienation.

Arun Joshi's third novel *The Apprentice* is more after Albert Camus's *The Fall* where the hero exposes the perfidy, chicanery, cowardice, and corruption of his own character in a mock-heroic way. Ratan Rathor came of a family where the mother was too ready to give sermons on the uses and advantages of money, and the father totally opposed to careers for making money. He has a difficult choice between two ways of life -- the money grabbing and "To be Respected! To be of use!" (19). His father was a Gandhian revolutionary who had offered himself to death by standing at the head of a procession, leaving Ratan helpless, poor, insecure and a state of crisis and fear about his future.
After the death of his father, he had approached all the friends of his father for help but for one excuse or the other they had refused to be of help to him, breaking his faith in the value of goodness, virtue and humanity. His life therefore becomes a story of succumbing to temptations under the threats of insecurity, anxiety, fear and restlessness. "And so, I redoubled my efforts, or rather the frantic thrashing of the great sea of indifference that surrounded me and that showed every inclination of downing me. My struggles, I imagine acquired the form of a frenzy" (27) as Ratan relates. Although his father had regarded "Careers" as bourgeois filth, he was bent upon having a career to make a head way in this indifferent world. With the help of his childhood friend, a Brigadier in the army, he manages to get a job. He puts in his best and learns all the tricks necessary to go ahead in careers and life and rationalizes "There were men I knew of who had pursued truth, whatever it might have meant to them". There were other who had devoted a lifetime to art or public service. Still other who had suffered endless privation, even death, for a thing called freedom. And, of course, there were those who, in the face of the world's indifference had chosen to expend their lives in the pursuit of goodness. 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"(41). After Ratan had struck surprising efficiency and established himself as a successfully sophisticated careerist he felt that "If earlier during the days of inn, my back had nearly been broken by the world's unjust thrashing, I was now struck dumb by its other face, the absurd servility, with which it was willing to turn about and worship, with which it was willing to turn about the worship and very mean whom it had earlier thought nothing of annihilating" (44). As he went
ahead, speeding through his worldly glory he faced many temptations that shook the moral fibre of his existence. But he soon found himself falling in line with the career convenience of conduct. He marries the niece of the office superintendent for the prospects of promotion. He derives convenient props for his immoral action from the post-independence corruption pervading the entire fabric of our nation. He takes to cunning, flattery and deception and accepts a big bribe in a deal involving sub-standard war equipment resulting in the death of thousand of men and was to face a court martial in the near future. Unofficially the Superintendent of Police had all the information about the misdeeds of Ratan and he had also informed Ratan that the only thing which could save the Brigadier was his own confession. This had sent Ratan into a crisis. He typed with the idea of now making a verbal and then a written confession of his guilt to save his benefactor friend. But because of his fear, selfishness and cowardice he could not bring himself to do it before the Brigadier committed suicide.

The whole incident shocks Ratan to his roots and like La Baptiste Clamence he was able to look into his own deception hypocrisies and corruption in a mockery of human motives. In retrospect he saw fall in his attempts to
contrive clever compensations for his childhood deprivations. As Ratan himself says, "All that I could think of was my money and the fact that I was not enjoying life or what I imagined enjoying life and the more I was determined to 'enjoy' life. And all the time I thought of death" (89). His was the case of a man who had lost his identity in becoming one with the process of career and business and knew that "Deep down I was convinced that I had lost my significance. As an official, as citizen, as a man .... THEY wanted this, Did they ever stop to think what I wanted. What right had they to claim my loyalties, take me for granted? What right? .... Oh how I have hated THEM at time. And hated myself" (74). But this remorse could be of no use to him. For himself he was criminal and a guilty man. He had willingly allowed himself to deteriorate and had no reason to find faults with the world. The very duplicity, corruption and immorality had hated in the society had now enslaved him. At best he could hold Himmat Singh responsible for getting him into this trap and causing his moral fall. He therefore, goes to Himmat Singh with a self-righteous anger to kill him.

When he charges Himmat for seducing him to this evil Himmat says, "You are bogus, Ratan Rathor .... Bogus. From top to bottom. Your work, your religion, your friendships, your honour, nothing but a pile of dung. Nothing .... but poses, a bundle of shams" (137). Ratan very much wanted to put a bullet through but Himmat was already a dying, unremorseful men. Laying bare the facts of the case, the truth of life and the nature of existence in which none could blame another for one's own misdeeds and fall. "Nor did he care if I shammed. For all the cared I could sham until I fell dead" (138) said Ratan. HE could be tempted, deceived and cheated into degrading and corrupting himself because he was a "spineless Flunky". As Ratan looks back he finds "the grey evening stretched
back twenty years until it seemed to me that there had never been sunshine, that for two decades I had lived only is smog; confused exploited, exploiting, deceiving and now deceived. Deceived beyond imagination" (138). He was trapped in the net of his own cunning and illusions and what he sees now is "An empty lifetime. What had I learned? Pushing files? Maneuvering? At forty-five all I knew was to maneuver. 'A trickster', that was what I had left life make of me" (139). He had now come to know of the difference between a good man and a successful man - One thing that they had all said of my father was that there was a good man. A very good man. And all my life I had waited for someone to say that to me. None had. And waiting I had descended come to those desolate streets" (140). He had also felt that "the villain I was hunting for had to be found elsewhere" (142) and in the end he realizes that" to know good, and to know evil and to choose evil : What greater betrayal of the spirit is there? And who does this choosing, I ask you? who does this choosing but ourselves. And yet we roam the world, beating our breasts, looking for scapegoats" (142). It dawns on him that he now needs a long apprenticeship in not flowing "with the current" but "be good" and "of use" to others and remember that "whatever you do touches someone somewhere" (149) and that ends never justify means.

In Ratan, Arun Joshi, has presented a brilliant Pascalian image of self-deception and self love in which he holds himself innocent and runs to accuse others for his misdeeds. Like Clamence, Ratan faces the reality and learns that there can be no paying truant with life and that there can no salvation outside of it. The fall of Ratan is an act of purification and he accepts his responsibility to himself to regain his innocence and purity. As a part of his atonement therefore he takes to the humbler job of a shoeshine. According to me, Arun Joshi
has perhaps exhibited a certain relativism in this novel. The narrative seems to
veer away from total responsibility and as such no absolute punishment. He
seems to hold that there is no right side without its reverse, none too guilty or
innocent. Sometimes we all are a party to an evil and unless the whole human
condition is altered it is no use persecuting a man. It is for this reason that the
novel has been presented a dramatic monologue where the narrator can have the
freedom of natural self-defence. In the character of Ratan the novelist seems to
project that in life no man has courage to wholeheartedly choose either right or
wrong. In him he presents a curious mixture of self-evasion and vanity and self-
condemnation and humility. But the fact that Ratan could not bring himself to
confession confirms has self-love and cowardice which he now wishes to cover
up by his humility of action. On a close reading the novel evokes a continued
distrust of Ratan even to his act of atonement. If it is read the other way round
then the novel becomes a bad homily on the sin of dishonesty.

This novel, deals more or less with the same theme adopting a
somewhat direct approach to the corruption of our civilised world. The merit, or
is it also the drawback? of the novel is that is says all that a treatise on the current
social and political scene in the country can and yet reads like a novel. What is
most striking in the novel is its relevance for the modern Indian reader. It is the
tale of a conscience - torn man with a curious mixture of idealism and docility, a
vague sense of values, a helpless self-deceptive effort to flout them for the sake
of career - in short, with a deep awareness of the conflicts between life and
living. The sadness of the tale lies in the inevitable succion of such young men
like Rathna Rathor, the narrator of the tale, into the whirlpool that our society is.
In fact, if we come to think of it, it is not the story of Rathna Rathor alone but
may be of every one of us. With an effective narrative technique, the novel is capable of holding the reader's interest though it is a monologue without any characters excepting the Brigadier. There is an imaginary companion whom the narrator addresses now and then to break the monotony. The use of the past tense, the story being told in retrospect, lends a peculiar objectivity to the tone of the narration.

The narrator is the apprentice who turns a fake, a sham, a corrupt official and an exhausted family man. As an official of the government having got up the ladder of bureaucracy in the time-honoured manner of pleasing the boss by being docile and even servile, the apprentice makes a mark officially but his inside gets hollow, moth-eaten. He loses his personality and identity. In his pusillanimity and also out of sheer boredom he yields to some tempting offers of bribery in passing defective war material during the Chinese invasion, not knowing the grievous consequences it might lead to. And when he comes to know of the blatant error he has made and that the direct victim of his act happens to be his close friend, the Brigadier in the novel, he is horrified at the atrocity of the whole thing. As contrast to what he is and what he does is his father's brave act in not submitting to the British but voluntarily exposing his chest to the British gun which ruthlessly shoots him down. He quite frequently recollects that act and feels his woeful inadequacy in living up to his father's image. Corruption at various levels and of different kinds that we notice in society is told with astounding candour that the narrator himself who has now lost the capacity to be shocked, thanks to his own experience, asks his imaginary listener.
Your are shocked? I suppose the young have a right to be shocked ..... If there is saw-dust in flour and common salt in Penicillin, why my dear friend, why can't men be expected to buy proxies in the hall of Death. Anyway, I, for one, do not have the right to judge. (p. 12).

Though the novel is full of the dark side of the apprentice's public life we get some stray glimpses into his innocent private life of the early days:

There were other things we did, things that young men do, things without meaning, except the meaning they acquire when youth is spent. What meaning is there in cycling ten miles, towards the setting sun, your hand on another man's shoulder or swimming across a river before dawn or going to village fairs to look at the girls, ..... or laughing at nothing until tears roll down your cheeks.

What meaning is there in all these unless it is the meaning of youth itself. (p. 17)

Despite the sheer joy of youthful experience one notices a tragic undercurrent in the tone indicative of the loss of innocence. But such things of no consequence gain significance only in retrospect. What the prentice is now bent upon is career. We see that he is full of admiration for superintendent who coaches him to go up the ladder of Government service:

And now that the decks had been cleared for my initiation he gave to me of his craft with open hands. Craft is the wrong word. What he transmitted was a mystique, a style, a style he geared not necessarily to getting things done but of making events obey your will whichever side it happened to
be employed upon. The right or the wrong of the side one took was not in question, nor were there touchstones by which one chose. No morals were involved. It was the skill in manoeuvre that mattered. Which more or less was an end in itself. One was like a sailor on a lake, concerned not with a destination but only with the manipulation of the sails, the riding of the wind. (p. 53)

Being a shrewd insight into the ways of officials the passage maintains an almost metaphysical stance in depicting their a-moral operation. It is a deftness that is perilously close to virtuosity but is here saved by the author’s sense of the concrete and his eye on situation and character. What might have been a moral fall seems to have been averted by a sense of shame that one notices in the apprentice towards the end. The apprentice shows a remarkable self-awareness is ruthlessly exposing his over-subtleties, fads, preoccupations, self-deceptions, ego and boredom of the dark phase of his life. It is this along with his present strength to laugh at his meaningless past that gives a kind of complexity to the character of Ratan. The episode of his article on ‘crisis of character’ which he now calls ‘a comic document’ is quite revealing. The whole account is rendered by the narrator with tongue cheek as we are finally told:

I sent the article to many newspapers but none of them published it. This did not prevent me from having it cyclostyled and distributed among a large number of my friends. I also presented it in the form of a lecture to a couple of Associations in our area. (p. 77)

What one notices here is not hypocrisy, for there is also an element of foolish sincerity, but the lack of drive or moral courage to practice what he
preaches. Immediately after this episode we witness the stark statement that he accepted a bribe -- not because of any need but for reasons beyond a simple and straight explanation. The whole business of living is so much muddled and has become a whirlpool of confusing values, contradictions and enigmas that he fails to comprehend the meaning of such acts:

What was right? What was wrong? No one seemed to know. Or, may be they knew, but when it came to practice no one seemed to be sure whether what was right was practicable. That was where the rub lay ....

And enveloping all this, a fog beyond the fog, were words. Like today. Words, words, words. Speeches, editorials, resolutions, handouts, slogans, posters, banners, proceeding of the numerous assemblies .... It was not the pros and cons of a case that we weighed as we weighed the men behind them. And the men were weighed in Money or Power. It soon became apparent to me that those who had neither were worthless. (pp. 48-49).

This initial restlessness leads to apathy and even cunning as we notice the gradual change coming over the apprentice. Of course this has meant inner corrosion which is also pathetic and even tragic because of the pervasive nature of the epidemic that finally turns millions into Nobodys. The tone of the tale fluctuates in consonance with the situation that crops up in a chronological way to give the work the credibility of a story. The contrast between the earlier Rathan, the apprentice who has hitched his wagon to the star of success and Rathan the apprentice who has passed through the dark night of soul, is brought out in the anger, remorse and intense suffering that one can feel in the tone of the narrative. The character of the Brigadier is presented to highlight in fictional
terms, the victimisation of the innocent in a corrupt society. The terrible predicament of the Brigadier, who has paid a heavy price for no fault of his and who is stunned, and almost paralysed having to face a court-martialling on a charge of desertion on the battlefield, has direct relation to Rathan Rathi's bribe. The S.P., who meets the apprentice makes a penetrating enquiry hinting at this grave offence in clearing defective war material which led to Brigadier's desertion from the battlefield. When the S.P., for lack of evidence, pleads with him to confess if only to save the Brigadier's life Rathan bravely walks out mentally resolved to save his friend. But the way he relaxes, dodges and finally writes out his confession, modifies it instantly and tries to justify his act by convincing himself of his 'innocence' and finally pocketing the letter forever shows his efforts to glaze his cowardice with something that passes for martyrdom and innocence by turns. The Brigadier could not, however, wait for his confession and kills himself. So Rathan Rathi with a deeply troubled conscience goes to Hummat Singh (who bribed him at the instance of the higher authorities) to avenge his friends' death but soon realises the absurdity of the whole thing and reflects:

That is a terrible sensation, my friend -- may God preserve you from it -- the realisation that one's life has been a total waste, a great mistake; without purpose, without results. There are many sorrows in the world, but there is nothing in the three worlds to match the sorrow of a wasted life. All else, thoughts of revenge, of pleasure, of pain pale before it, are made pointless. (p.194)
The apprentice's sense of the futility of it all scalds him inwardly and leaves him to exhausted that he tells his listener most pathetically:

So you see, my friend, here I am, a man without honour, a man without shame. Perhaps a man of our times. .... How do I know life has purpose? Actually, I don't. And, quite honestly mine is not the mind that can grasp such questions. But let me tell you something that a colleague of mine used to say. Life is a zero, he would say, and, he would add, you can take nothing away from a zero .... I have begun to see a flaw in the argument. You see, you can take things out of a zero. You can make it negative .... Life might well be a zero, for all I know, but it seems to me that it need not be negative And it becomes negative when you take out of it your sense of shame, your honour. (pp. 204-205).

That Rathin Rathor who is not in intellectual like Sindi or Billy but an ordinary man of less than ordinary deeds should appreciate the distinction between zero as negative and, implicitly, zero as positive speaks for the character's development. And to make it credible the subtle distinction is put in the mouth of a colleague. He is naturally amused now by some of the pet illusions that mankind nurses and is reminded of the Pujari who used to retort when teased about his profession as waste of time and as chanting mere mumbo-jumbo, doing nobody and good:

I am here to be of use. And one thing I can do, the only thing that I have been taught to do is to shout this mumbo-jumbo .... Foolishly, blindly. But what reason is there to suppose that the making of money or of a chair, or the pursuit of women is any the less foolish, or less blind? (p. 203)
Hence out of sorrow and humiliation groping to understand the meaning of life and as if to expiate his sin Rathan Rathor undergoes the strongest apprenticeship in the world, namely, wiping the shoes of the congregation sitting on steps outside the temple every morning on his way to the office:

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 victims of my cleverness, those whom I could have helped and did not. After this I get into my car and go to office. And during the day whenever I find myself getting to be clever, lazy, van, indifferent, I put up my hands to my face and there is the smell of a hundred feet that must at that moment be toiling somewhere and I am put in my place. (pp. 206-207).

What is evident is the novelist's compassion, vision of life and sensibility that is nourished by legends and tales of sin and expiation, peculiarly Indian. That it is perhaps the most appropriate social comment to appear on the contemporary Indian scene is not to diminish its artistic merit but to admire the handling of tract material within the framework of a novel. The technique has a marvellous hold on the material even as the autobiographical retrospective narrative of Rathan Rathor has a compelling urgency in its concern, a ruthless self-introspection and on the whole, a convincing development of the protagonist at the end of the story — all of which saves it from the blemishes to which a work of art is prone in its over-insistent preoccupation with social and personal ills of
the day. What is so pervasively around us as atmosphere is verbalised and given concrete shape here in a tale that holds the reader by the neck just as the apprentice himself does to the imaginary companion even like the old man in "The Ancient Mariner" holds the wedding guest under his spell. It must be admitted at the same time that The Apprentice gains its significance more because of the social background of which it is a product though sadly speaking, human corruption as material for art may not lose its edge at any time. But that the novelist employs a ruthlessly simple and direct style to expose some aspects of modern Indian society through the life of the narrator in a poignantly confessional tone can disarm even his detractors. One wonders at the same time if this social relevance does not limit the artistic scope of the novel in the sense that it does not raise profound human questions. It is perhaps fair to Mr. Joshi to add that the novel overcomes this delimiting factor by hinting at a combination of humanism and religion as the saving grace of mankind, steeped in corruption.

The third and the latest, The Apprentice (1975), again in the reflux technique, recapitulates the 'chequered career' of Ratan. Rather, the narrator hero. In the form of a monologue the narrator reminisces his graduation from a jobless village boy to a very powerful member of the urban elite. In between, for twenty years, he experiences the pangs of the so-called civilization with its inevitable traits - telling lies, indulging in bribery, debauchery, graft and drunkenness, behaving as if all these had been peripheral vices little adulteries of the soul that didn't count. But at least his alert conscience exhorts him to expiate his sins of cowardice, dishonesty and even indirect murder. Like the burden of the old man in "The Ancient Mariner", Ratan has the same kind of compulsion: "But I must, I must tell all. All or nothing".
Early in life, Ratan learns that being the son of a freedom fighter is of no practical value whatsoever. His father, dying a martyr to the cause of country’s freedom, left three of them alone: a starving and cynical widow, her illness and Ratan, living on patriotic fervour but no funds. The people for whom his father had squandered a life-time forget him within a year. Embittered with a bleak future, Ratan undergoes a humiliating experience by being rejected and jeered at in hunting jobs, and narrowly escapes the starvation-death through the generosity of his penurious room-mates in an inn. A chance introduction by one of them (perhaps a stenographer) secures him a job of a temporary clerk in the department for war purchases. From that time on, the ‘pretending’, ‘practical’ Ratan never looks behind. Obsessed with wealth, influence, security, he even refuses to recognize those who once saved him from death. "I was a different cut: educated, intelligent, cultured, and it was my right that I should rise in life, to levels higher than the others aspired for." (p-32)

And he does rise through corrupt practices, making a compromise with his ideals. Gradually his conscience degenerates totally and suffers a ‘crisis of character’. A situation arises where he is trapped into becoming an executioner of his best-loved friend. An agonized self-searching follows that ultimately leads him to an admission of his defeat. "He finds strength in spiritual humility which prompts him to seek for the second time a basis for action. Symbolically he starts at the lowest of low levels -- polishing the shoes of the congregation at a temple door."

One might, if one wishes, read into it an allegory of our country's progress since Independence with the difference that the protagonist in the novel
is conscious of his own lack of integrity. Can we say the same of ourselves as a people? But Joshi seems to suggest rather unequivocally that there is nothing wrong to make a second start, nor is it too late. ".... one must try and not lose heart not yield, at any cost, to despair." (p. 149)

The story comes to an abrupt end with Rathor standing at the doorstep of the temple that offers a deserted look, "frozen petrified, like our own civilization itself". The message at the end that "there is hope as long as there are young men willing to learn and ready to sacrifice. Willing to pay the price". This sounds jarring as it has not been fully dramatized. The question the reader asks himself is: could this rather weak and fake character ever have had the objectivity, the self-awareness, to be able to describe his own observations with so much clarity, "even if it is only the clarity of hindsight".

From the characterization point of view again, the narrator - protagonist fails to evoke sufficient interest in himself. He is full of land platitudes with no trace of humour whatsoever. This pose would be acceptable, were it used as a "deliberate ironic mask to give a penetration analysis of character or events". But the moments of insight are banal, trival. The language lacks freshness and immediacy. Joyce is imitated not only in content but in technique as well. The frequent use of either a romantic reverie or stream of consciousness device makes the narrator's soliloquies sound like ravings of maniac.

There are occasional flashes of honesty, no doubt; and on such occasions the language becomes forceful and evocative: "I remember that procession. I watched it from the house of a friend .... The crowds were the same..."
as you find them now; multitudes, yellow with dust; ragged, poor people come from distant villages, a human tide threatening the confines of the street. They marched with determination, unwilling and non-descript. It was only their roar that transformed them into something grand, something more than that the wretched of the earth are normally allowed to become" (p-11)

In a few instances Joshi shows his remarkable ability of constructing a complex and intricate texture of thought and feeling with the simplest two-syllable words. For example, in the description of the party in Bombay, the corruption, callousness, greed and hypocrisy of the so-called elite are ruthlessly laid bare. Joshi's special gift here is that he uses very small number of major characters and even fewer minor ones.
REFERENCES

1. The Apprentice. Arun Joshi; Delhi, Orient Paperbacks, Delhi, 1974.
