CHAPTER IV

THE APPRENTICE: CHOICE AS CONFESSION
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The Apprentice is often compared with Camus' The Fall without proper justification. Both the novels deal with protagonist's existential dilemma, and are in a confessional mode. The comparison seems to end there. Camus' protagonist's existential predicament produces "absurdity" - totally an existence without any moral content. Absurdity produces moral vacuity and the predicament of the protagonist does not evoke sympathy or disdain but an inevitable sense of resignation. Joshi's protagonist wrestles with his existential predicament and his struggle is related to the ethos of the post-Independent Indian society. The interaction between the society and the man results in man's one-up-manship over his environment. In one sense Arun Joshi's protagonist is one of the contemporary heroes who overcomes the environment. But there is a difference. The protagonist's triumph, obviously measured in terms of success, the sense in which it is understood in

India, does not produce exultation but a stultifying remorse. The remorse is produced by an analytic bent of mind and by an aborted aspiration towards moral impunity. In *The Fall* Baptiste Clemens forms the focal point of the narrative. The absurdity that emanates from the narration has its source in Clemens whose despair and disdain characterize his narration. Ratan Rathor is the focal point used by Arun Joshi to dramatize an existential tension. If Camus' protagonist is the focal point of "existence" Arun Joshi's protagonist is the focal point of "essence." Ratan Rathor's father provides the Hindu and Indian moral perspective against which Ratan seems to be moving. Himmat's derision of Rathor's ways strengthen the moral perspective which leads to the protagonist's abysmal plunge into remorse leading to an involuted sort of self-righteousness.

If we grant that Joshi's protagonist has to be understood against the Hindu ethos, Ratan Rather at once becomes an extension of Babu, Khemka and Billy of Joshi's earlier novels. What differentiates Ratan Rathor from the other characters of Joshi is that the protagonist himself looks
into his innerself, promptly inspired by his father's righteousness and Himmat Singh's insinuation. In Camus' novel the predicament of the protagonist is irredeemable but Joshi's protagonist has still in him the elements of penitence that will ultimately push him towards redemption. His narration of his fall to a young man has to be seen in this light.

Rathan Rathor strikes a fine balance between lofty idealism and sordid realities of life. He fails to see the difference in the quality of success at the idealistic and realistic levels. It may be wrong for us to think that he is a symbol of the decaying beaureaucracy in the Indian society. He seems to represent the failure of an individual, son of a heroic father, who laid down his life for the sake of his country and a cause. He seems to have lost the nerve to sustain the paternal legacy. Rathar's failure is largely because like his father, he has no cause to fight for. The Chinese invasion comes too late for Ratan to redeem himself. As an individual he lacks the resilience to swing back after a first few instances of deviations to make himself comfortable. Two workers and a stenographer nurse him during his illness. It is the stenographer who helps him to get a job
in the war Department. Later Rathor totally ignores them.

This change in Ratan need not be interpreted as the result of hardboiled cynicism. Ratan's cynicism is not vicious, like that of Clemens. It has a touch of remorse, sentimentality and a puerile sense of disdain. But it is greatly influenced by his enormous sense of apathy. This apathy somehow makes him think that he is morally paralysed. He despairs of redemption. A character like Himmat Singh vivifies the image of horror of hell he always dreads. He presents an individual who is aware of his guilt but refuses to own it up. In a sense he is a coward with a difference. Here is a coward who believes that penitence and humiliation can somehow restore certain sanctity to his life. Ratan is aware of his sordid existence and at the same time is also aware of a better kind of existence. It is not a case of existential agony a struggle for choice between the two modes of existence. Joshi's concern in The Apprentice is his sad perception of the fact, that why given all the facilities, and opportunities an individual, instead of overcoming his environment to find a better one, tries to exploit the environment for base ends, thereby vitiating the environment which in turn makes existence a horror. It is horrifying to see men choosing to be sub-human when clearly the call
of the times is for superhuman.

There is nothing in Ratan that distinguishes him as a hero. Whatever happens to him later is the result of a confusion that precludes an appropriate choice. This uncertainty changes Ratan's outlook and it is coloured by a desire to be one-up always just to subdue the warning of the self that constantly reminds him of meanness in his actions. It is this that drives Ratan to confess before a young cadet.

Ratan's confession is an exploration into his past nescience. He knows that his confession has a cathartic effect on his self. It authenticates his lamentations and makes him realise that he has missed a chance to redeem his past. His one chance to adjust himself to his spiritual patrimony was to confess about the quality of goods supplied to the war front for which his friend the Brigadier was courtmartialed. But the cash-ridden and profit-oriented Bombay suppresses his inner-promptings.

Ratan explains his predicament as follows:

To put it briefly, I just did not react. At all. It is to the credit of the brainwashing that I had carried on myself ever since my
Bombay. visit that by the time I was faced with the consequences I was not even certain that I had had amnesia or forgotten that I had taken a bribe - it was just that I had diluted the act with such a mass of rationalization and pushed it behind so many layers of make believe that although I remembered the deed I did not associate it with myself. 2

What we find in Ratan is not an expression of individual disintegration but an intensified search for individuality, the individuality he successfully relegates to the background in order to make himself comfortable. This makes him wear a mask. The masquerade starts with his promotion to the higher cadre in the war office. Many of his seniors were bypassed. He is promoted over his seniors. Yet he believes in honesty, morality, heroism and personal integrity. But he feels all this would be possible only when one reaches a position of comfort and convenience. He practises cunning to reach his aspired goal. Once he reaches the summit of his ambition, he finds that he is not in position to uphold any of the principles he had dearly held. Letting down the

Brigadier whom he respects and loves is a case in point. A ruined Brigadier does not move him to confession. He exemplifies in himself the truth that the end is vitiated by the means.

The Brigadier shoots himself to death; and Ratan visits him in the morgue. The horrible death of the Brigadier begins to haunt Ratan. He says: "There followed then nights and days of which I have only a faint recollection. What I had seen that morning at the morgue was not so much a shattered skull as the vision of the vast pit at the bottom of which my life crawled like a worm. And, now, this vision trailed me wherever I went." It is a Faustian dilemma for Ratan. The vision of his sin causes in him for the first time a Sense of fear which he never experiences earlier. Ratan reflects:

My fears, my fears! My life an endless torrent of fear. Some heaped upon me; others invited. Invited by my delusions - but how could have I known? I am no wise man. And here was this terrible fear, sent by someone, the same someone perhaps who had spoken to me earlier. On the morning of that New Year Day as, dazed and drunk,

3The Apprentice, p. 128.
I had stood watching the Brigadier stamp his verandah, a caged, demented animal. 4

Yet Ratan is sure about the retribution. We are not sure whether Ratan comes out a chastened and different man from the ordeal. There is an attempt on the part of Ratan to discuss the brigadier's issue with his wife and share his griefs with her. He realises that he is not then worried about fears but worried about a fear of madness.

In a fit of temper and remorse Ratan goes to Himmat Singh, weakly believing that he would kill him for what he supposed to be his betrayal. Ratan tells the cadet: 'Betrayed. There, my friend, as another magic word. It is always other people's betrayals that mess up things for us, never what we do. No, never we.' 5 Himmat Singh tells Ratan that he was only a pawn in the big game played by the secretary. Himmat's revelation puts Ratan's or what he considers to be his 'achievement over the years in its perspective. As he finally puts it, "The information did not impress me as one might have expected. There I was looking at a man who would be dead within a month, but I was concerned only

4The Apprentice, p. 129.

5Ibid., p.
with myself. When I could no longer escape the fact that Himmat Singh was only telling the truth I was filled with a great rage. Why did you pick on me? I wailed as though a saint had been seduced. I was angry but I was also near tears. 

It is here that Joshi is critical and cynical about the Indians. He feels that they have no character and a sense of pride. He portrays Ratan as a typical Indian always self-seeking without the slightest moral compunction. When Ratan demands to know from Himmat Singh, why he was chosen to be the pawn in their game, he replies that they had picked him for no particular reason that he was a spineless flunkey. The country was full of spineless flunkies. Ratan's meeting with Himmat Singh makes him realise that it is not always possible to re-trace one's steps. He finds it difficult to escape from the maze of evil and practice truth. He says: "Thus I reflected. Without hurry and without confusion and without that stormy raving that used to overwhelm me earlier. I was not a good man. And I knew it was going to take a long time becoming a good man, if I ever did. I thought of all

6 The Apprentice, p. 136.
this with calm but also, for the first time, I felt deep down, very deep down, that not being a good man was not all right by me. I knew that something was going to have to be done about the matter even though for the moment I did not know what that something exactly might be. And why was I not a good man? I wondered what precisely was the matter with me? To this I had no answer."

Ratan who has successfully subdued the self and his sense of propriety does never think of his father as he wrongly concluded that his father's heroism could not even get him a job. It is only Himmat Singh who prompts him to think of his father, which he does in the Secretary's house. When Himmat Singh tells him of his past and takes him through the slums where he had as a boy, a whore's son, lived, Ratan sees the path of degradation he has been treading right from his war office efforts. Himmat Singh rebukes him for the sort of compromise he made and tells him that he had no need to do such a thing. At this point Ratan says that "Himmat Singh was born in filth and in filth he

7The Apprentice, p. 141.
had grown. But he had dealt with them, the bosses, men like my Secretary, he had dealt with them on their own terms and he had troubled some of them. He was not proud of it, not anymore, but he had at least not sold himself, like I had, nor, for that matter, had he betrayed a friend.\(^8\)

It is here the protagonist's attempt to redeem his past appears sincere. He still can make the choice and he has that ability also. Perhaps it is this ability that helps him to laugh at Poojari's corruption. He recollects his meeting with the Poojari one evening. The pujari is a simple man with little understanding of metaphysics. But he has a reply, in his own defence, a reply of course, that no one bothered to hear. As Ratan says:

He would say: 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. And so that is what I do. Not only for myself. For everyone. Foolishly, blindly. But what reason is there, my friends, he would ask, 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? The men, of course

\(^8\)The Apprentice, p. 144.
would laugh it off. So would the rest of us but, of late, I have been thinking about the pujari and his words.\footnote{The Apprentice, p. 146.}

Ratan realises the need to feel ashamed of his past and resolves amidst confusion to do an act of purification. He says:

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 Zero, he would say, and, he would add, you can take nothing away from a zero. He was a persuasive man and I must confess I used to be much impressed, at least, for the duration of his talk. Of late, however; 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. And if my colleague were alive today I should ask him this: Would he prefer a negative to a zero. 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.
This realisation on the part of the protagonist makes *The Apprentice* an incisive and acrid lamentation of a decent young man who is on the brink of total degradation which would have meant an irretrievable fall. It is in this sense also that *The Apprentice* is different from Camus' *The Fall*. In *The Fall* Baotiste never thinks of redemption where as Ratan is always hopeful that sometime in future he can expiate his sin and find redemption through a self invigorating choice.