CHAPTER II

THE FOREIGNER: CHOICE AS INVOLVEMENT
Arun Joshi’s *The Foreigner* at a first reading strikes one as a baffling mixture of situations and predicament of characters caught in the 'vortex of Existence'. What this 'existence' is and how it affects the protagonist appears to be the thematic concern of the novel. The novel employs three places which have only the value of verisimilitude. This aspect of realism is used to dramatise the consciousness of the protagonist. If we grant that Boston, New York and New Delhi are three stand-points where the protagonist’s consciousness seems to halt and view itself, then, Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist, is a creature of three places, namely Boston, New York and New Delhi, and Kenyan nativity and adolescent London Education merely provide us with a backdrop for consciousness that is let loose.

Sindi, his full name being Surrender Oberoi, of mixed parentage, studies for his doctorate in Mechanical Engineering in the University of Boston. He loses his parents early. Till he finishes school at Nairobi, he is looked after by an uncle. After that he leaves for London for further studies.
In London he meets Kathy in a bar. He finds her drinking heavily to forget her sorrow. Involvement may not be the precise description of this relationship, but that is what happens to Sindi. He gets involved with Kathy and asks her to marry him notwithstanding the fact that she was already married and much older than him. When Kathy leaves Sindi to join her husband returning from vacation from Scotland, Sindi feels hurt and let down. This involvement with Kathy and the consequent breaking off turns him into a cynic rather prematurely. The failure of his affair with Kathy makes him resolve not to involve himself in any kind of emotional entanglement.

From London he goes to Boston and starts studying for his degree in Engineering. To bolster up his earnings he takes a part-time job at the foreign office where he is supposed to look after new Indian students. Even though he has no roots in India, still he finds himself in a place where he comes into contact with India and Indians. There is no sufficient evidence in the text to say whether this exposure to the Indian student community makes him conscious of his cultural rootlessness. We understand from the text that he scrupulously avoids any involvement at any level with others, especially the Indian students.
He meets Babu at the Logan air-port and then takes him to the Y.M.C.A where Babu is to be lodged. He drops Babu at the Y.M.C.A and goes to meet June whom he had first met at one of those Balls of the International Students Association. Actually his intimacy with her starts on a wrong note. On their first meeting when she asks him about his nationality and other details, Sind tells himself,

That just, about spoiled everything. I wished she hadn't asked that question. Everybody asked the same silly question "Where are you from?", as if it really mattered a great deal where I was from.¹

This element of non-belongingness is characteristic of Sindi which is recognised by June when she meets him for the second time. During their meeting June asks Sindi whether he believes in God. He is surprised by that question and asks her why she asked that question. June replies:

There is some thing strange about you, you know something distant. I'd guess that when people are with you they donot feel like they are with a human being.²


²Ibid., p. 30.
She wrongly attributes this to his Indian characteristic and goes on to say rather relevantly, "I've a strange feeling you'd be a foreigner anywhere."³

June is very right about this quality in Sindi. But it did not occur to her for a long time that he could be a foreigner in love too. In the following passage, Sindi reflects, "I was not the kind of man one could love; I had learnt that long ago. For June it took almost a year to find out."⁴

When Sindi chooses to come to India, the officer at the consulate makes him feel that he is making a mistake. We have no answer to the question, why does Sindi choose to come to India. We can only say that he comes to India to get involved even though he is for ever avoiding involvement. The reluctance to get involved makes him take things non-seriously. There is a sardonic glee in his attitude whenever he finds people taking things seriously. That is why many Indians seemed to him maniacs. This attitude is clearly shown when he talks to Mr. Ghosh. Sindi observes, "He seemed a bit of a maniac to me ... they all took themselves so seriously."⁵

³Ibid., p. 31.
⁴Ibid., p. 355
⁵Ibid., p. 40.
Ghosh's visit wakes him up to the problems of Khemka's Office. But he does not want to be involved. We do not see detachment but a cynical evasiveness about taking up of the responsibility when Sindi reflects,

I began to wonder how serious Mr. Khemka's income-tax problems really were. This self-inflated but dangerous fat man liked me and was warming me to get out before it was too late. But what difference did it make? I was not involved.

From this passage we understand that it is his intention to be detached but a sense of helplessness about Khemka's awesome problems overwhelsms him. He is overawed and realises that his involvement in no way helps Khemka even if he wants to. His involvement becomes meaningful only at the end. After Ghosh's meeting with Sheila we find Sindi helplessly reflecting,

I could hear the rumblings of a distant stream but since there was very little I could do I saw no point in getting myself involved. But as later events proved one does not choose one's involvement. The day came when I got involved anyway (Emphasis added).

6 The Foreigner, p. 41.
7 Ibid., p. 44.
The fear that prevented his marriage to June somehow seems to haunt Sindi throughout. In Delhi, where he could have been a star attraction, he limits his acquaintance to Khemka and Sheila. When Khemka asks him about his life, Sindi replies, "I had no social life to speak of. I had only one life and it could be called by whatever name one wished."8

Sindi meets Sheila at Wengers after the lecture by Prof. White. They watch a trade union leader shouting to people about happiness. He just then remembers Babu and how June is concerned about Babu getting back his concentration and happiness. Sindi thinks that the leader "believed just as Sheila believed, that he could be happy if things were different. But the crowd knew, that one was never happy. Nothing made any difference."9 He also tells Sheila that "Nothing makes any difference, Sheila. Even if Babu were alive he still would be unhappy. When you are dead you are happy; only the living suffer, unless they are careful."10

8The Foreigner, p. 45.

9Ibid., p. 51.

10Ibid., p. 51.
From the preceding citations we can infer that Sindi, after Kathy's affair, does not want to experience pain. To avoid pain one has to avoid involvement with people. This is precisely what he does. This self-imposed detachment is a part of the dynamics of choice which is given an aesthetic pattern in Joshi's novels. It is the problematic of choice that prevents Sindi from coming near Babu. He realises to his horror the great mistake he made by keeping himself away from Babu when Sheila shows him Babu's letter. Babu wrote in his letter to Sheila that "Sindi is always willing to listen to me, but he is so terribly cynical I am afraid he will make fun of me if I took my small problems to him."\(^{11}\) When he becomes aware of his growing attachment with June, he reflects that "If I only had the strength to act on what I knew was right, I might also have saved Babu had I possessed the courage to drop that lovely hand and walk out into the night."\(^{12}\) He curses himself after seeing Babu's letter for not understanding Babu. He feels as if some had "splashed acid right into the wound"

\(^{11}\) *The Foreigner*, p. 52.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 69.
When Sindi finishes reading Babu's letter he realises that he has not met his own problems squarely so that he fails to perceive the limitations of his freedom to choose in any given situation. It's only after June's death that he becomes aware of the significance of involvement and non-involvement. After reading through Babu's letter, he feels that "If only I had known what he was going through, I should have guessed, but I had been blinded by my own detachment."\textsuperscript{13}

His idea of detachment sometimes directs his thinking towards dying. He feels that his life has been without purpose and he existed only for dying. At Cape Cod he remembers what his uncle used to say about love, "To love," my uncle had said once, "is to invite others to break your heart. You knew what it is to love and have your heart broken. You grasp the essence of pain. What used to be an abstract idea now spreads through your blood like poison. It rages through the inner most arteries of your soul, corroding and destroying all that is tender in you."\textsuperscript{14}

Sindi's foreignness or rootlessness appears to be the cause of his detachment. After the death of his uncle at

\textsuperscript{13} The Foreigner, p. 58.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 77.
Nairobi, Sindi feels a foreigner everywhere. He rationalises that everyone would feel rootless because rootlessness seems to be one of the conditions of modern man's existence. Though the modern man is rootless, he cannot lead a life of absolute isolation. He is perennially conscious of the dangers of involvement, but since life means action he has to choose between various options available to him. Like a typical protagonist of most of the 20th Century Fiction, Sindi appears to be neurotic about the problematic of choice. When he sits in June's house, his fear of getting involved returns to him again. He thinks, "Was I getting involved? Could this be the beginning of uncontrollable events?" This attitude towards detachment ruins what could have been an excellent marriage with June. When June asks him about marriages he says that they have no love in them because they are possessive in function. He goes further and tells her,

I said I did not quite know except that whatever I had seen so far in life seemed to indicate that marriage was more often a lust for posse-

15 The Foreigner, p. 87.
ssion than anything else. People got married just as they bought new cars. And then they gobbled each other up.16

Sindi himself suffered a similar fate when Kathy had to leave him for her husband. He was deeply disturbed and the pain of separation still bothered him. He feels, "Even after several years, somewhere in the labyrinth of my consciousness the wound still bled. I feel sad and perhaps showed it."17

Sindi tells June that "one should be able to love without wanting to possess" and continues, "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".18 Behind this kind of rationalising is his fear of making a meaningful choice.

After making love to June on his birthday, Sindi reflects "I stayed awake, counting the broken pieces of my detachment. I counted the gains and losses and the losses mocked me like an abominable joker. Then I too fell asleep."19 He becomes aware of the sad consequences of non-choosing only after the death of June.

16 The Foreigner, p. 67.
17 Ibid., p. 67.
18 Ibid., p. 67
19 Ibid., p. 80.
Sindi goes to June's house after hearing about her death and while returning feels, "as if he has experienced his first insight into the mystery of existence."

For the first time he begins to doubt his idea of detachment. He thinks that for him "Detachment at that time meant inaction. Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it. The Gods had set a heavy price to teach me just that. (Emphasis added)"

The phrase, right action, suggests that in Arun Joshi's fiction right action consists in unhesitatingly choosing what is right in terms of one's conscious being and doing every bit one can to accomplish it. This point is vigorously articulated and aesthetically patterned in The Strange case of Billy Biswas. This is really a great change in a man like Sindi who told June at Cape Cod, "I had wanted detachment but I did not quite know what kind of resolutions were necessary to achieve it."
In Delhi he grows pensive about poverty. This fact never troubled him in London or in America. But now this fact stared at him menacingly.

But I knew they couldn't get their prophylactics without inheriting the chaos of my being. I knew that in thousands of offices the abominable wheel of industrialisation was grinding on inevitably. And we who pretended to be the masters were driven before it like torn bits of paper on a windy day.  

In Delhi he feels that his fierce spirit of freedom to choose is threatened by the meek attitude of the Indians. He says, "My life had carried me through strange places and I had seen men act from the ends of their tethers, but the servility I came across in Mr. Khemka's office was quite new to me."  

After June's death we find Sindi debating within himself of the error he made in being detached. He feels that he had learnt to be detached from the world, but not

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23 *The Foreigner*, p. 43.  
24 Ibid., p. 13.
from himself. He feels that this is what ultimately led to Babu's and then to June's death. June's memory lingers inside him like an incurable ulcer. He feels that his tremendous illusion about detachment led him to destruction.

From Boston to New Delhi is quite a displacement for Sindi. He is not sure why he chose to come to India. He even rejects a lucrative offer in New York. From the narrative point of view Sindi's travel from Boston to New Delhi synchronises with an inward journey from a truncated notion of existence and detachment to a comprehensive and adequate sense of detached existence. After June's death he realises that detachment lies in the right kind of action and choice. So far he has not acted. He allowed himself to be used by June and Babu. Now the question that stares him in the face is where he would begin the right kind of action and when he would choose and go about it. Joshi, the writer, has subtly hinted at Sindi's predilection for compassion, sympathy and a certain sensitivity to poverty. Sindi, June, Arun and Karl go to Cape Cod to celebrate Sindi's birthday. On the beach he tells June, "what was important was the fact that we all suffer equally at the hands of existence. There-
fore, the only emotion human beings deserved was one of compassion."²⁵

His sensitivity towards suffering seems to send him to India. The stark poverty he saw for well over a year disturbs him. "The workers clothes were falling off in rags and sweat poured off their backs as if they just had a shower." He juxtaposes this with Khemka's affluence. He reflects, "They sang as they pulled and their dark muscular bodies glistened with sweat. And at the end of the day they would get two rupees or perhaps three. Mr.Khemka, it was said made thirty thousand a day."²⁶ He grows pensive as he realises the apathy of the rich towards the poor. His reflection on this has a tinge of sadness about it." He feels, what was the point in all those big men like Mr.Khemka talking about God and pain so long as half naked men had to wrestle with a beastly mass of concrete under a scorching sun."²⁷

²⁵The Foreigner, p. 192.
²⁶Ibid., p. 197.
²⁷Ibid., p. 197.
Sindi feels that they are his people and he moved among them as if he were a stranger. He is very critical about Indian businessmen. He feels that they are responsible for the injustice and cruelty prevailing in the Indian Society. When he goes to Khemka's place to inform him of the raid on his office by the income tax department, he experiences a strange sense of hilarity and is struck by the absurdity of Khemka's position. Later he comes back to his flat and starts drinking. Just then Sheila arrives and tells him that her father was arrested for evading tax. Sindi sharply reacts: "Serves him right". After Sheila's departure Sindi reflects on himself and suddenly feels helpless at the repetition of the same patterns in his life. The following passage describes his sadness vividly:

In the stagnant deadness of Mr. Khemka's world I had had the feeling that I was settling down. In truth it had only been a change of theatre from America: the show had remained unchanged. I had met new people with new varieties. They merely had different ways of squeezing happiness out of the mad world. And they suffered differently. 28

28 The Foreigner, p. 207.
He now realises the full implications of the right kind of action. Sheila suggests that the only way to save her father would be by substituting Sindi in his place. He could not have accepted the arrangement a few years ago. Now he feels he has to make a choice. "In the past I had let life lead me by the nose and I knew the damage I had caused in the name of goodness. I did not have any desire to be good any more; I merely wanted to do my duty."

Sindi, after the death of Babu and June, thinks that he is partly responsible for their tragedy. He feels that in the past he had made the mistake of putting the consequences of his actions on others or presumed to take over their actions as his own. He feels that both had boomeranged and in the end both had done more harm than good.

Right from the death of Babu, Sindi has doubts about the validity of his detachment and he always thinks that somehow his attitude has been responsible for their death. After his confrontation with Mr. Khemka, he feels his existence is also threatened for the first time. A genuine introspection

29 The Foreigner, p. 207.
takes place in Sindi and this results in an outrageous show of temper against Mr. Khemka. Sindi lashes out at Mr. Khemka: "Your heartlessness drove the only person I ever loved to death. You have prostituted my ability for a whole year for your diabolical aims. And now you want me to go to prison for you." In the same passage we find Sindi contemplating on the need for becoming humane. It is this sort of growth in his mind that provides the narrative impetus to the novel. This concern is amplified and for the last time he dwells on his wrong attitude towards detachment in the following passage:

It need not have been so random. We could have acted more responsibly, with greater detachment. And if I had been more irresponsible than any of them, that too was a result of randomness. Circumstances and events had led to my detachment from all of them. But, as Sheila had pointed out, I could not be detached from the world and remain attached to myself. The long dark journey of the past had been an attempted escape from world of entanglements only to allow my passions a freer rein. 31

30 The Foreigner, p. 215.
31 Ibid., p. 221.
The pressing concern about choice drives Sindi from randomness to specificity. His passions no more will be given a freer rein. He is not anymore trying to escape from the world of entanglements. The drift we find on the beach of Cape Cod when he thinks that he is only born for dying is substituted by a sense of purpose. Drifting with a lack of purpose, he gradually comes alive with a bristling sense of purpose. He thinks of his future and reflects:

And the future? In an ultimate sense, I knew it would be as meaningless as the past. But in a narrower sense, there would be perhaps useful tasks to be done: Perhaps if I were lucky, even a chance to redeem the past.  

His search for purpose becomes a necessity to redeem the past. His sensitivity to poverty, pain and suffering provides him with a direction. It is this direction that leads him to Muthu. After his final confrontation with Khemka, Sindi goes in search of a job. His search for a job serves as a narrative device. Finally he lands in a job in Bombay with a small firm manufacturing lathes. He comes back

\[32\] The Foreigner, p. 221.
to Delhi and gets ready to leave for Bombay. When he is ready to leave, his servant informs him that Muthu came to his house in his absence a number of times. Sindi decides to pay a visit to Muthu the next day. This visit has a narrative significance. For all purposes this visit to Muthu ends his quest for purpose and purpose stares right in his eyes.

He hears about overcrowding in Delhi. But a visit to Muthu's place comes as a revelation to him. He is found reflecting: "I'd heard much about overcrowding in Delhi but this was the first time. I had met somebody who lived with a dozen other people in the same room." Muthu's prospect of losing the job and Khemka's firms being taken over by the bankers stirs Sindi against the kind of exploitation that the poor are forced to put up with. He is deeply moved and his soul tells him that this would be the time for him to act humanely. The following passage amply demonstrates a change in Sindi we have been just discussing:

"We sipped over tea in silence, watching the dusk engulf the shabby, scurry slum in a black mist. So this was where Muthu came from every morning."

33 The Foreigner, p. 223.
This was the room where he spent his nights with eleven other people, one of them tubercular for ten years. Now some big banker was going to turn him out of that also, not because he did not want to work but because another big shot had made stupid mistakes and had not the guts to face up to them. 34

Muthu tells Sindi that he can save them by taking over the office. Sindi's old fears about getting involved come to the surface once again and he tells Muthu of his fears. In a very subtle way Joshi transforms Muthu into Lord Krishna advising battle scared Arjuna. Muthu tells Sindi, "But it is not involvement, Sir," and adds, "sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved. He spoke quietly, but his voice was firm with conviction. 35 Muthu's persuasion as far as Sindi is concerned clinches the issue. The need to redeem the past and his recognition of purpose in life direct him to the only possible conclusion. He decides to act and says "a line of reasoning that led to the inevitable conclusion, that for me, detachment consisted in getting involved with

34 The Foreigner, pp 224-225.
35 Ibid., p. 223.
Sindi takes over the office and immediately faces a daunting task. Now that he has found purpose in life, he steels himself against buckling under pressure. Joshi faintly echoes the Gita in Sindi's decision to remain firm. Sindi's purpose is to do what is right without bothering about the fruits of action. The following passage reiterates the change in Sindi's consciousness.

To make matters worse, fear of bankruptcy hung over us like a sword. One wrong step and we could have gone reeling down the road to dissolution. But at the same time, I knew there was no choice for me except to remain cool, as I had always been and to concentrate on decisive action. The fruit of it was really not my concern. 36

The Bhagavad Gita dramatises an archetypal situation which is so inclusive that any existential problem can be subsumed under it. Most protagonists in the Indian Novel in English refer to The Gita. For example in Rajan's The Dark Dancer, Krishnan's vacillation between Kamala and

35 The Foreigner, p. 225.
36 Ibid., p. 228.
Cynthia is also dramatised in terms of the paradigm of detachment, involvement and choice, we have noticed in The Foreigner. But there is a difference between Sindi and Krishnan, although they seem to come to terms with the problematic of right action for its own sake without bothering about the fruits of action. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar says that "the issue between detachment and involvement, indifference and commitment, going it alone and communing is posed prominently enough but not properly consumed in the action or characterisation."³⁷ The preceding comment on The Foreigner is perhaps a response to the narrative mode in The Foreigner which has the first Rajan employs an omniscient point of view although the narration proceeds largely from the point of view of Krishnan. The objective dramatisation of Krishnan's problems makes his choice objective, dramatic and is in harmony with the narrative thrust. In The Foreigner it is in Sindi's consciousness which he himself makes transparent that other characters like June, Babu, Sheila and Khemka come alive and become meaningful only in terms of that central consci-

ousness. Any existential problem can be fictionalised in terms of a consciousness that is intense and activated. What Joshi loses by using the first person narration is largely compensated by dramatising the central consciousness in terms of a theme which has existential connotation but which is not a philosophic exercise in Existentialism.