CHAPTER-V

The Apprentice
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The Apprentice (1974) is chronologically the third novel by Arun Joshi. The two novels preceding it, The Foreigner (1968) and The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1973), and the one following it, The Last Labyrinth (1981), deal with heroes who are in some way or the other globe trotters. Moreover, the heroes in these novels have all been educated in British or American universities. The Apprentice is, however, distinct from these novels. The action of the novel takes place in India, though there are references to the British rule. Educationally, Ratan Rathor, the hero of this work of fiction, is a “home-spun” one. He has received no higher education beyond the frontiers of the Punjab. No character in it has received any foreign degree.

The Apprentice explores, to use Arun Joshi’s words, “that mysterious underworld which is the human soul.”¹ In this novel, Joshi delineates the agonizing predicament of his protagonist, Ratan Rathor, who feels confused and lost in a world full of chaos, corruption, hypocrisy and absurdity. Its theme is akin to Graham Greene’s The Heart of the Matter where the protagonist undergoes a painful struggle to maintain faith in a hostile environment of corruption, with concept of justice and religion.
Feeling powerless and alienated from his own self as well as his surroundings, Ratan becomes an existentialist character. As Tapan Kumar Ghosh observes:

Crisis in the soul of an individual, who is entangled in the mess of contemporary life with its confusion of values and moral anarchy and his untiring quest for a remedy lie at the core of Arun Joshi’s exploration of human reality in The Apprentice.²

It is the story of an individual with a guilty conscience, “a man without honour...without shame...a man of our times”³ trying painstakingly to retrieve his lost innocence and honour. At the same time it is a severe indictment of a rotten, rudder-less, materialistic society with its unscrupulous amassing of wealth in defiance of the sanctity of means and its absurd pursuit of success in career. Thus, the novel is about, unlike Sindi’s escapism or Billy’s rebellion, the protagonist’s conformity to, and victimization by a crooked and corrupt society, hereby lending it a wider social relevance.

The other important theme of the novel is about the inevitability of evil boomeranging on the evildoer. Despite the chaotic circumstances the choice always lies with the individual, and when one deliberately chooses evil, it boomerangs. Although technically the novel bears a close resemblance to Albert Camus’s The Fall, thematically the most
prominent influences noticeable in the novel are those of the Karmic principle of the *Gita* and the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi.

In *The Apprentice*, as Mr. H.M. Prasad writes, “The tone is almost Pascallian. Through self-mockery he exposes the world. Self-remonse will rehabilitate him. *The Fall* contains recovery; it is a necessary process of his individuation”. It is through his vein of self-mockery that Ratan Rathor exposes hollowness of the Indian political and social systems. Professor Prasad has rightly pointed out that “the novel is both a social document and threnody of a tormented soul”.

*The Apprentice* can be divided into three phases. H.M. Prasad remarks:

The novel enacts three stages in the human-divine comedy of Ratan. The pre-Independence period is the dawn, the period of idealism, the phase of innocence, the post-Independence India is the broad daylight of experience, the inferno of corruption, the last part the area of expiation, is the door to the purgatory.

Ratan, a child of double inheritance, was brought up in an atmosphere of antithetical philosophies of life. On the one hand is the patriotic and ideal world of his father and on the other is the worldly wisdom of his mother. It was the age of Mahatma Gandhi, and under the magic spell of the Gandhian values like simplicity, honesty, selfless service and non-violence he gives up his career as a successful lawyer,
gave away his property to join the freedom movement and is ultimately shot dead while leading a procession. The advice of his father keeps ringing in his ears: “To be good! Respected! To be of use!” (19) Ratan’s mother, a tubercular woman, with a pragmatic attitude towards life tells him to earn money: “Don’t fool yourself, son… Man without money was a man without worth. Many things were great in life, but the greatest of them all was money” (20). She further tells him: “It was not patriotism but money—that brought respect and brought security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws—but money was law unto itself” (20). Ratan is torn between these two conflicting choices—one shown by his idealist and patriotic father, the other by his down-to-earth mother.

Another person whose memory keeps haunting him all his life is that of the Brigadier. His memory is associated with the boyhood escapades amid idyllic setting, the cross-country they undertook together. He remembers how the Brigadier fought for Ratan when half a dozen miscreants accost him while the two were returning after one of their boyhood escapades. Ratan feels the Brigadier’s selfless love for “… me who no one ever fought for” (16). He felt “I was not alone amidst the sugarcane, abandoned on the planet” (17). This incident proves another
contrast to his life after the “fall” which has resulted in the loss of paradisiacal innocence.

The greatest flaw in Ratan Rathor’s character is his cowardice. His higher self goads him to emulate his father’s example, his lower self dictates him to pursue, as his father calls, “careers and bourgeois filth” (33), and torn between the two he is reduced to a split personality. An extremely ironic situation is created when he decides to join Subhash Chandra Bose’s army: “I am very excited. I am on my way to greatness... about to lay the foundations of the glorious future” (21). As he set out on his promising journey, with every mile that he traverses, his courage gives in, and “sweating and exhausted, in sight of his destination, he sat in a mangrove and wept” (22). This was the first time he falls prey to his lower self, indicative of the future that awaits him.

Ratan’s tubercular mother advises him to seek a job in Delhi with the help of his father’s friends who now were well established and wielded some clout in the political corridors. “Tight in the stomach, no doubt, but quite full of hopes,” he goes to Delhi where to fail would have been “the sign of the greatest incompetence” (31). He makes a futile search for a job and his “back has nearly been broken by the world’s unjust thrashing” (44). Wherever he went, he was “examined, interviewed, interrogated,” only to be “rejected” (30).
Now Ratan realizes that martyrs like his father and the Gandhian values they had fought for have been replaced, as Victor Anant says, "by opportunism, treachery, cowardice, hypocrisy and wit." The nation, his father had laid his life for, was a nation "of frustrated men sailing about in a confused society, a society without norms, without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose" (74). As M.K. Naik writes:

The most disturbing phenomenon on the sociopolitical scene has been the steady erosion of the idealism of the days of the freedom struggle, the new gods of self-aggrandizement and affluence having rather too easily dethroned those of selfless service and dedication to a cause.

The main thrust of the novel is a contrast between pre-Independence idealism preached by Mahatma Gandhi, "a man of suffering" (9) and post-Independence disillusionment. This Christ-like figure taught our national leaders how to use the weapon of non-violence to drive away the British, our alien rulers. But with the achievement of Independence, the Indian rulers and the ruled forgot what Gandhi had taught them. The democracy that came in the wake of the Republic was only in name, because with every subsequent election it was throttled at the polling booth, election being, "five-yearly farce of the ballot-box." (74)
Ratan, the son of a freedom-fighter, has been an eye-witness of his father being shot dead while leading a procession, shouting patriotic slogans such as *Inquilab* and *Sarfarosi Ki Tamanna*. Ratan is the child of double inheritance. His father, an ardent patriot, gives up his lucrative practice as a lawyer to join politics at Gandhi's call. He donates his income and property to the national cause, without thinking of the difficulties faced by his wife in running the family. She is herself tubercular. She coughed and spat blood. Ratan reminisces that in living with his tubercular mother “is like living with death”.

Well, she lay there spitting blood, and my father called her several times without getting a response. Finally, she answered. You should go to a sanatorium, he said, all upset and excited. I'll be all right, my mother said, taking my hand in her own. No, you must, he persisted. Where's the money, my mother snapped at last. I'll go back to my practice, he said. Who'll lead the processions, said my mother, mocking. I don't care about the processions, he said. (9)

It is but natural that this lady should be disillusioned about the sacrifices made by patriots during the freedom struggle. A woman suffering all the time physically, mentally and economically becomes almost cynical about money as it is the only thing needed to make a man's life happy in the world. Even Ratan Rathor in his bureaucratic career thinks of the discrepancy between the ideals dreamt by the pillars of the
freedom struggle and the condition of India under the leadership of the politicians reaping the fruits of free India.

Ratan Rathor reminisces that in free India our politicians are worse substitutes for the alien Englishmen: “Could it be that the Englishmen had been merely replaced? And many times over? Could it be that nothing else but this has happened?” This problem becomes so nagging that Raan Rathor is compelled to think that it has simply given us a new slavery: “Yes, a New Slavery with new masters; politicians, officials, the rich, the old and new. Swindlers in fancy cars.” (63,64). This problem of freedom and the new slavery in place of the British imperialism has been one of the fertile topics in the Indian English fiction. Bhabani Bhattacharya in A Goddess Named Gold, speaks of the throttling of our democracy at the polling booth: “Free India will die a hundred deaths. Beware, lest one such death takes place at the polling booth of this village.”9 Thus, Ratan Rathor is torn between the world of his father’s idealism and mother’s pragmatism. He takes an extreme course to amass money for him by compromising all the idealist lessons given to him by his father.

Besides the freedom struggle, the 1962 Indo-China war also figures as one of the main issues involved in the deteriorating situations of those people who control the war from their Secretariat chambers and are always bent upon grinding their own axe even at the cost of the national
honour. The Indian debacle in the North-East led by a Brigadier, Ratan’s childhood friend, is due to the defective war supplies because of the connivance of the Minister and the Secretary of the Department, not to speak of the lower cadre officers.

_The Apprentice_ deals with Ratan Rathor’s adolescent innocence, manly experience and saintly expiation. It is the protagonist, Ratan Rathor, who narrates the story of his life and times to an N.C.C. cadet came to New Delhi to participate in the Republic Day parade. Ratan narrates the episodes ranging from his childhood to his apprenticeship as a shoeshine on the steps of a temple as a sort of expiation for his sins. The narrative, however, is not straightforward, as it keeps on swinging between the past and the present. The tone of the narration is that of self-mockery and the narrative impresses us in the end to be a kind of Horatian satire upon the abuses of position and power in the context of the Indian political system. The references to politicians and officers, however, are generic; yet persons behind them; but to obviate it Arun Joshi cautions us of such an approach and therefore he writes:

The characters in this novel as well as the personality of the narrator are all inventions and bear no resemblance whatsoever to persons living or dead. (6)

But this is simply Joshi’s non-controversial pose mingled with his
gentlemanly poise. As we go through the novel, it is not difficult to find the references to shady deals undertaken by political executives and bureaucrats. *The Apprentice* reads as a cynical hymn to corruption, which has a biting and corrosive edge.

Ratan presents before us a background of his childhood life both before and after the death of his father. Ratan has been an eyewitness to the sight of his father lying dead, while shouting in a procession, at the hands of a British sergeant. He had simply been a ten-year old boy at that time. Ratan’s mother, after the death of her husband, had to sell away the remaining of the family property to meet the expenses of her son’s education up to the graduate level. As a student Ratan also had high ideals and hoped that free India will bring a new light to the citizens of the Republic. But with the achievement of Independence all these hopes of Ratan get shattered:

..... the death of my father had meant only one thing to me. That it was stupid to get killed like that. Stupid and meaningless. It served no one. Those who thought you served forgot you within the month. No life, I had thought sitting by the woman, no life had been more pointlessly spent than that the life of my father. (83)

While Ratan tries to live up to his father's expectations of him “To be good! Respected! To be of use!”(19) his disillusioned mother keeps on
persuading him not to be influenced by his father's crazy ideas of his joining the freedom struggle. She wants him to be pragmatic and to realise the importance of money:

In search of means of livelihood after his graduation, Ratan comes to Delhi, "a city of opportunities". (31), It is here that Ratan gets disillusioned when he goes to seek help from certain of his father's lawyer friends. In his search for employment he realises that though the posts are advertised, most of them are "filled by people, who had, in some manner, been pre-selected" (30), During his stay in Delhi Ratan gets shelter in an inn beside a mosque where several others also occupy the same room with him. A stenographer living at the same inn, manages a job for him in a Government office, dealing with war purchases.

Now begins Ratan's life as a unapprentice clerk. Ratan keeps his eyes upon careerism despised by his father as bourgeois filth. But Ratan ignores this and works hard to please his Superintendent. The first thing that he does after employment is that he leaves the inn to settle elsewhere and even tries to keep away from the stenographer who had been instrumental in securing a job for him. In a very short time of six months, on the recommendation of the Superintendent, he gets confirmed in the service on his assurance that he would marry the Superintendent's niece. Henceforward he never looks back and on the Superintendent's retirement
gets this coveted post, which brings for him every comfort in life, denied to his parents. Ratan realises the practical importance of negotiations and deals in life.

Deals, deals, deals, my friend, that is what the world runs on, what it is all about. If men forgot how to make deals, the world would come to a stop. It would lose its propelling power. Men would not know what to do with themselves. They would lose interest. It is not the atom or the sun or God or sex that lies at the heart of the universe; it is deals. DEALS. It is a bit like my mother's prophecy, about money. It is not whether you like making deals or you like money. They are simply there, like air.

(51)

In this Ratan has grasped the pulse of the time and this makes him rise upward, though it is through his corrupt practice in which he is just a cog in the corrupt official machinery. Sometimes he gets so fed up with the corrupt practices that he thinks of deliverance through death, like a few of the existentialist characters. During the time of the nation's adversity, he is not the only one to gain prosperity by clearing substandard war-materials supplied by Sheikh Himmat Singh.

Ratan's own case is an instance of irony of fate. There is nothing unethical about the fact that the son of the freedom fighter runs after a bureaucratic career, but it is highly illegal and unethical and unscrupulous that he should get corrupt and act against the national interest. What is important in the character of Ratan is that he is fully aware of it. But he
cannot escape the situation because all around him there is, what he calls, the crisis of character. He even writes an essay on the topic which, after so many papers reject it, is circulated in the cyclostyled form. Ratan calls this essay a "comic document" (58) but tragic, too. He gives a resume of it to his silent listener, a student from the Punjab. He begins it with a quotation from Mahatma Gandhi, borrowed from a book on him and followed by the one from *the Bhagavad Gita*. Ratan paints in it the golden history of India's past, often referred to in the tourist pamphlets. In it he refers to the landmarks of the ancient Indian civilization such as Harappa and Mohenjodaro, the conquests of Kalinga by Asok and the rule of *dharma* and truth.

Then he describes the dark ages of the country when with the falling night the sun of *dharma* set. This was followed by a "twilight in which what hope was left dwindled" (59), This was again followed by the night like that of "amavas" (59), which lasted "the span of twenty generations, a night that led us into slavery and ended only with the dawn of Independence." (59) But the crisis of Indian character comes to the forefront even after Independence which made "a display of greed before which the plunderings of a Ghaznavi paled. Freedom did not bring that elevation of the spirit that the great leaders had hoped for", (59) The country is chained by corruption. Ratan Rathor emphasizes this aspect of
the crisis of Indian character in his article and he shows it to so many of
his colleagues that they nickname him Mr. Crisis of character. But despite
all this, Ratan Rathor confesses:

You see, to cut a long story short, just before the war started I
took a bribe. An enormous bribe. Yes, Mr. Crisis of character
took an enormous bribe. No more, no less (60).

Ratan goes on to explain how he had to accept the bribe. The
situation now shifts to the freedom struggle and to the time of the Chinese
invasion. The Minister and the Secretary associated with war supplies
passed Sheikh Himmat Singh on to him, the Superintendent of the section
who had refused to pass the defective war materials. But he had to accept
the bribe from the Sheikh “for some obscure reasons” (60) thus selling
away his soul to the devil. The Sheikh operated in a way that nothing
could be proved as all the documents regarding the deal were to be
destroyed. The Sheikh teaches Ratan the Machiavellian philosophy of life
and he tells Ratan that only a fool and hypocrite likes getting killed. The
Sheikh also impresses upon him that the rulers of the country are “phony
people who knew only how to make speeches” (84), and that “the ruled
were brainless” (84). In his official rise to success Ratan never gives up
magnanimity. He donates freely to charitable funds and writes patriotic
letters to the editors of certain papers. He even donates blood to Red
Cross for the national cause and inspires all Indians to rise as one nation.
Yet Ratan goes on to the primrose way of pawning his heart and soul for the cause of the worship of the Mammon. Sometimes he reminisces why he began taking bribes even though he did not “need the money” (61).

Besides the war purchases, hectic purchases for the refugees also brought prosperity to the persons dealing in it. Ratan is amazed to see duplicity all around. All those who matter are master-fakers. Rulers of free India became worse substitutes of the British. Ratan is very eloquent about the role of bribe in free India:

If I had taken a bribe I belonged rather to the rule than the exception. Peons were frequently taking bribes. So were government officials and traffic policemen and railway conductors. A bribe could get you a bed in the hospital, a place to burn your dead. Doctors had a fee to give false certificates, magistrates for false Judgment. For a sum of money politicians changed sides. For a larger sum they declared wars. All those who acted in the public interest accepted by factory inspectors, bank agents and college professors; by nurses, priests and chartered accountants; bribery. Men took the bribes to facilitate the seduction of their wives; women for seduction of other women. All this I knew and had known for twenty years. And now if I had happened to have accidentally indulged in a little slip-up, the sky was not going to fall (112).

This is a fine justification of why Ratan starts taking bribes though he does not need the money for any one of his needs. With the accumulation of riches, Ratan also gets engulfed in the vices associated
with wealth such as taste for wine and woman. In Bombay he once gets engrossed in “fantasies of pleasures” (78). The world of Bombay, however, also reminds him of the contrast between the simple life led in the village and the life of city carrying on commerce and business and bargains. Ratan's crisis of character always keeps on pricking him. He realizes that he is after wrong things but he cannot avoid being an accomplice in the official misdeeds. His case is striking in that the son of a freedom fighter has become engrossed in the anti-nationalist and nefarious designs.

Ratan has deep anguish in his heart at the fate of his childhood friend who as Brigadier in the North-Eastern front has been responsible for the nation's debacle at the hands of the Chinese army. The real culprits, however, play in the corridors of power in the Defense Ministry. The politicians and bureaucrats acting in the interest of the self do not even think of the national honour and clear the defective war materials supplied by the Sheikh who is a kingpin in the deal. People who have no experience of the field and from places far away from the operation site guide the war operations. All the guilt of the national defeat falls upon the head of the innocent Army Brigadier who is helpless as ammunitions do not work and as such the guns misfire.
A reverse of this kind of situation has been mocked at by Bernard Shaw in *Arms and The Man* where Captain Sergius, leads his battalion forward into desperate action without much ammunition in which, however, because of the defective ammunition in the enemy camp, he becomes a hero in the battle of Slivnitza only because the enemy's guns misfired:

And there was Don Quixote flourishing like a drum major, thinking he'd done the cleverest things ever known whereas he ought to be court-martialled for it. Of all the fools ever let loose on a field of battle, that man must be the very maddest. He and his regiment simply committed suicide; only the pistol missed fire: that's all.¹⁰

With reference to the Chinese invasion, the same thing happened to them. They got the better of the Indian Army whose weapons misfired because of the defective ammunition.

Ratan feels for his Brigadier friend, who, in his school days, had saved him from being thrashed at the hands of hooligans. He is now baited and court-martialled for the Army's debacle, though the real culprits are those who are responsible for the war purchases.

Even though intelligence people have information regarding the shady deals, the Superintendent of Police conducting the enquiry, has no
substantial papers to prove it. Ratan in the police lock-up for a night sometimes decides to confess, and even makes a clean breast of everything in writing, which, however, he does not pass on to the S.P., who has to leave him scot-free in the absence of any documentary proof. For this anti-national act on the part of the Minister and the Secretary, the Brigadier suffers a nervous breakdown and commits suicide. Despite this Ratan views his misdeeds to be "little adulteries of the soul that did not count" (112).

Sometimes Ratan, in his guilty conscience, tries to cleanse himself with the help of worship in temples. But to his great amazement he finds that even the temple is a den of corruption. The pujari of the temple thrives on it. His son has been booked for constructing buildings, which had all crumbled down because of the use in the construction work of substandard building materials. The priest, thinking of the high position of Ratan in the department, offers him bribe to help his son escape from this enquiry. It is only after this that Ratan takes up a novel way to expiate himself. He does not enter the temple to worship the deity there; rather he sits outside on the stairs to wipe the shoes of devotees either in the morning or evening while going to or coming from office, while his expensive car is parked outside. It is here that Ratan comes across a student from the Punjab coming to Delhi to participate in the Republic Day parade. He also shines his shoes:
HERE you are! Almost the last. Let me get your shoes. Would you care for some tea, if you were not in a hurry? It is already dark. But I forget it is November (7).

_The Apprentice_ is a self-analysis by Ratan of his own crisis of identity and consciousness. He narrates the story of his life in the form of a dramatic monologue in which time and again he dwells upon his character. He is conscious of all the time that he has not been doing the right things, yet he goes on with his affairs and not till his Brigadier friend commits suicide on being court-martialled, does he feel anguish. It is after this episode that he seeks to get solace in the rituals of religion, which also repel him as being no less corrupt than the official world. As a substitute he takes to the job of shoeshining to expiate the sins committed. The following lines make it clear how bruised Ratan’s soul is:

> And all these years this terrible loneliness, something that you may not suspect by looking at me, something that none has ever suspected. How, all these years, I have been alone, so horribly alone in my failures, carrying them in secret, like a thief, close to my heart, until their blazes have turned upon me and turned me to ashes. Believe me, I have seen it happen. I have seen my soul turn to ashes (74-75).

But Ratan’s soul is not yet dead. There is hope for him yet. Even the Sheikh confesses,
My soul was killed, you put yours to pawn. But souls that were pawned could perhaps be retrieved... May be souls are like muscles, Ratan Rathor. May be to develop them one has first to put them to use (146).

Shoeshining devotees footwear puts his soul to use. His pawned soul is retrieved in its expiation. But even before he is conscious of it, he is all the time concerned with a schism in his soul. Speaking to the N.C.C. cadet he wonders that the capital is “a no-man's land” (8). In his loneliness Ratan Rathor finds himself “abandoned on the planet” (17), and even finds the world “a place without law, a planet turning in the darkness, going heaven knew where” (44). The anarchy prevailing in the world seems to rock him “through some dark dungeons of the world” (103). Like Graham Greene's Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter*, Ratan, too, feels a kind of pity for the planets. Sometimes, Ratan's agonizing alienation leaves him face to face with cosmic problems. Ratan Rathor uses phrases and terms of expressions using device of variation plus repetition, so important in creating rhythm in the novel, as expounded in Foster's *Aspects of the Novel*. Such expressions are scattered throughout the novel, to stress Ratan's tormented soul. The loss of discrimination between good and bad makes Ratan conscious of the fact that life without it is “panic and foolishness” (23). This pestilence is a common weakness
in our nation. Unemployment is what Ratan calls “my biggest dread” (27) but even after getting an employment he is not free of it.

Ratan, in his introspection, feels that the most striking aspect about his life is a discrepancy between idealism and realism. He had high hopes as the son of a freedom fighter; but in his practical life he associates himself with the biggest of the frauds. But what is commendable in Ratan Rathor is that he confesses everything to lighten the burden of corruption on him. He calls himself, or others call him, “a master-faker” (28), “a sham” (28), “a sham and a faker” (28), “an upstart” (43), “a thick-skin and a washout” (41), “a whore” (49), “a scoundrel (70), “a fool or a great hypocrite” (83), “spineless flunkey and bogus” (136-39), “a pile of dung” (137), “a bundle of shams” (137), “a trickster” (139) and “a betrayer of the spirit” (142). Such expressions have been integrated into the syntactic patterns of the sentences. But in many of the cases they form part of verbless sentences or simply stray noun phrases. Ratan sometimes even gets disillusioned with the concept of, and the word, freedom. He speaks in the monologue:

Freedom. Freedom. What is freedom but a word, my friend? Freedom of men, of nation. No more than a word. We thought we were free. What we had, in fact, was new slavery. Yes, a New Slavery with new masters;..."¹¹

Ratan is fed up with the flow of words:
Words, words, words. Speeches, editorials, resolutions, handouts, slogans, posters, banners, proceedings of the numerous assemblies, exchanges with foreign countries, memoranda of the chambers of commerce, manifestos of trade unions, draft five-year plans, books extolling our past. An endless barrage of words, very few of which, I soon realised, meant anything, just as they mean nothing today (64).

Ratan, in the course of his rising corruption, feels not only restlessness but also apathy and indifference within himself: “Upon me, inside me, like a boil, like leprosy” (66). His role in the treachery at the national peril makes him realise that he “was a liar, as crooked a liar as any common thief” (108). He tries to get out of “the crookedness of the world”; “the crookedness of oneself” (148) and after a great deal of deliberation he decides in favor of wiping the shoes of the congregation.

The Apprentice is very close to existentialist philosophy. As Thakur Guruprasad says:

Ratan Rathor, the protagonist of the novel, conforms to the dot to the dictionary definition of “existential”: the doctrine that man forms his essence in the course of his life he chooses to lead. He is born a good man, the son of a martyr in the national movement. But when he goes out of his village to graduate in life of the crooked world, honesty does not get him even the lowest job, and he makes his essence, as he goes choosing the life he leads.12
In his life full of compromises and deals Ratan’s conscience is restless and he spends sleepless nights. He admits, “To sleep is a privilege not given to all. As long as you can sleep, all is well” (8). Ratan wallows in the bourgeois filth, and even though his position gets higher in the official hierarchy, he feels no aggrandisement, rather he shrinks. Dr. Hari Mohan Prasad hints at the point when he says about Rathor, “He gets isolated and incommunicative. He becomes an island”.\textsuperscript{13} His soul is smothered by the seedy life all around and even though his father’s idealism smoulders within him, it is not allowed to burn up till the end of his final realization after the Brigadier’s death.

On close scrutiny we find Ratan a coward, “a weather vane turning its head where the wind blows” (66) and on the other a slave to his circumstances: “The wide world took me in its wake, overwhelmed me, smothered me” (65). Despite this Ratan is finally responsible for his deeds as he betrays his conscience. We find that Ratan’s lot is thoroughly existentialist. As R.G.Das remarks:

Arun Joshi appears very close to Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene and William Golding in the sense that the act of treachery inflicts an irreparable injury upon the moral nature of man, and that a guilty Ratan lives inescapably in the presences of his conscience. He too realizes as Razumov does in Conrad’s Under Western Eyes, that all a man can betray is his conscience.\textsuperscript{14}
His self-betrayal leads him to a feeling of being a non-entity. His loss of identity is total as he says, “I was a nobody. “I was a nobody. A NOBODY-Deep down I was convinced that I had lost my significance: As an official, as a citizen, as a man”, (73). In depicting the painful existentialist predicament of Ratan, Joshi makes him a peculiarly modern man “at once everyman and nobody”.15 He feels fed up with the life of hypocrisy, deception and all-round corruption. He gets isolated and estranged from the society as from his own self. Now he wants to know what he really is –“a master faker”, a hypocrite, a sham or a martyr’s son. It is a quest for his identity. He wants to know what he really is, if not a ‘master-faker.’

Although he enjoys his life in Bombay, all the time he is conscious of the evils of the so-called elite suffers from, which is laid bare by the accounts of a party in Bombay:

A retired major general was roundly abusing, in the filthiest of language, those who were fighting; some already dead. It seems to me that nearly everything I heard or said or did that evening was in one way or another obscene. I was, in fact, at the peak of the dung heap that I had been climbing all my life (85).

His fall is complete when once he “had merely walked into a brothel hounded by a strange disturbance” (89). His utter vacuity and dissatisfaction is complete.
Ratan's sense of insignificance and the resultant anguish at the destruction of his authentic self was not his own self and had to lick the boots of his bosses and put on smiles for their pleasure. As Tapan Kumar Ghosh aptly remarks: "He was not himself but simply a cipher in the mass existence of the crowd, a cog in the social mechanism."16 His soul had been rendered sterile by the perverted modern civilization and by his own inherent cowardice, and he saw his "soul turn to ashes" (75).

T. S. Eliot's influence on Joshi is very marked as the latter uses imagery and symbols, as Axthelm says, "portray a mind gone beyond conventional limits, a mind which cannot be comprehended in the context of objective reality, but is so unique that only its own strange creations can properly reflect it,"17 The purpose of these images is, as R. K. Shrivastava says, "by their cumulative effect reflect their being."18

The influence of Fyodor Dostoevsky is also not missing. Like a Dostoevskian ‘mirror’, Himmat Singh, the Sheikh lays bare in his face the putrefied self of Ratan. As Ratan confesses: "it was perhaps something of me that I saw in him. And vice versa" (81). To Ratan, he was: "Mon semblable, -Mon frere!"19 When Ratan expresses his apprehension regarding the disclosure of the deal, Sheikh taunts him:

You are a fool, he said...people thought there was a law book laid down by God which they must follow...There was no such law-book, Rathor, he said, what existed, he said, was not written by God but a silly society that would do anything for money (76).
His faithful wife, *Geeta* also turns out to be another Dostoevskian mirror. She reminds one of the ladies in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*. Isabel Archer, the ‘Lady’, an attractive American girl is married to a worthless and spiteful dilettante, Gilbert Osmand, who marries her for her fortune and ruins her life; but to whom she remains loyal in spite of her realization of his vileness.

Adapting an idea from Ignace Fuerlicht’s *Alienation: From the Past to the Future*,

Modern man may either try or adjust to “others, to society, to the system, abdicating his true self, or he may strive to keep and develop his individuality and alienate himself from society.”²⁰

In the case of Ratan Rathor we come across both these types of alienation. Ratan Rathor, in his efforts to mould himself after his father’s idealism, becomes a misfit in the modern world and as such he has “to abdicate his true self to fit in the corrupt society and eke out a living. He is alienated from his true self in the process”.²¹ Caught in the web of these two types of alienation, Ratan becomes a prisoner of his own self, which builds a labyrinth for him. This is true not only to *The Apprentice* but also to Joshi’s other novels as well. V.V.N. Rajendra Prasad states,
The core of Joshi’s fictional theme consists in viewing the self as labyrinth, and any kind of assessment that the self makes of itself is a therapeutic process.²²

It is difficult for Ratan to get out of the labyrinth and get lost in the ways of life, which leads to the corruption of his self. According to C.N. Srinath, The Apprentice is “tale of 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 a career-in short with a deep awareness of the conflict between life and living”.²³

In the absence of any demarcation between right and wrong, success and failure, loyalty and betrayal, love and hate, Ratan Rathor finds himself “reduced.... to the status of those leaves of autumn that are blown here and there, at the mercy of the wind. Why be surprised if one of them falls into the sewer” (148). Ratan Rathor suffers from an agonized soul. It keeps him tormenting. Ratan Rathor refers to one of his friend’s definition of zero, life as zero and his own amendment of the concept of zero:

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 (149).

Ratan’s distinction between zero and negative contains in it a subtle point of life’s philosophy. The last sentence of the indented quotation above makes the distinction very meaningful. Applied to Ratan’s case this holds out well. Before the idealism preached by his father, Ratan’s life might have been a zero; but as he feels ashamed of his misdeeds and expiates it, he upholds honour, so that his life should not degenerate into a negative one. Moreover, Ratan gets aware of the need of a positive attitude to life. He affirms:

There is hope as long as there are young men willing to learn from the follies of their elders. Willing to learn and ready to sacrifice. Willing to pay the price. (60)

Ratan’s confessional mode of the narrative is also an affirmation of his real quest of identity which had been a sort of abominable crisis which tempts him on to act as dishonorably as he could with his other accomplices in this official hierarchy. Ratan’s confessions make it evident that The Apprentice, as a sarcastic hymn to corruption is also a satire. Through the narrative Ratan goes on to expose a duplicity in the Indian character. This is to be seen at the top political and bureaucratic
levels. Its presence at the lower official level is a reflection of the top-rank people around us. They may talk of “religion” (60), “politics” (60), “culture” (60), but “nothing connects” (60) and “chaos” (60) and “panic” (60) engulf us. The freedom that has been achieved at the cost of great sacrifice is no more than a word because we have been dominated by a system of new slavery:

Yes, a new slavery with the new masters: politicians, officials.
The rich, old and new. Swindlers in fancy cars. Some of these men I recognized; others I only heard about. (63)

This sometimes makes Ratan feel a strange kind of “restlessness” (75), “apathy” (66) and “indifference” (67). He also feels “run down” (67) and “used up” (79). Even in his affluence he feels disturbed and depressed and darkness within and without. The situations in the country seem as if the blind were following the blind. It is natural that he should feel as one of the “frustrated men sailing about in a confused society, a society without norms, without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose.” (74)

Himmat Singh, the Sheikh is Camus’s Caligula-like character-out to destroy the world. He hated the world for, as he thought, the world hated him. It was in Bombay that Ratan came to know a bit about this underground man. Immaculately dressed, with his extra-large cigarette, his perpetual goggles and twisted lips, he would always mock the world with
his rough and sarcastic voice. Though he had extraordinary intelligence, it was made perverse by unknown suffering. The Sheikh would carry out his operations stealthily not to make money but to destroy “everything from top to bottom, from one end of the continent to the other” (81). Once while Ratan was recounting his childhood and his father’s martyrdom, the Sheikh asks him, “was it not intriguing that the son of a revolutionary should be doing what he was doing?” And when Ratan says that his father’s death had a deep impression on him and had made him “a man of courage,” the Sheikh cut in: “You are a fool, Ratan Rathor, he said, a fool or a great hypocrite. Why did I not admit, he said, that my father’s death had meant nothing to me. It might have shaken me up…It certainly had not meant to me what I said” (83). Ratan was stunned to realize that his father’s death had meant only one thing to him: it was “stupid and meaningless” (83) to get killed like that.

*The Apprentice* is a narrative told in a flash-back. The narrative concentrates upon the “brainwashing” (106) of Ratan’s “clerical mentality” (85). This results in Ratan’s alienation and loneliness, which turn his soul into ashes. But his realization of “the sorrow of a wasted life” (140) makes Ratan come clean out of the purgatory of national melting pot which goes on amalgamating things for the nation's amelioration.
Ratan starts anew with a firm faith in life and himself. As Ratan says, "I know it is too late in the day. But one must try and not lose heart, not yield, at any cost, to despair" (149). This is reminiscent of the lines in Tennyson’s "Ulysses:" "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." Arun Joshi’s vision has a deep impact of the Karmic principle of the Gita: "There is no intervening agent between you and God. What you sow you reap." This is reminiscent of what Dostoevsky’s character, Father Zossina says, "everyone of us is undoubtedly responsible for men and everything on earth."24

Thus, Arun Joshi's greatness resides in his having added a social dimension to The Apprentice through his moralistic vision of responsible existence. Ratan expresses, the hope that young generation of the unpolluted listener like him "might yet hold back the tide" (150) if they are "willing to learn from the follies of their elders. Willing to learn and ready to sacrifice. Willing to pay the price" (150). The novel ends at dawn, symbolic of Ratan's transformation and regeneration: "It is a cold dawn. But no matter. A dawn, after all, is a dawn" (150). He does not give way to despair like Clamence does: "It’s too late now. It’ll always be too late."25 It is this difference towards the end of The Apprentice that reserves for Joshi a high place in the hierarchy of Indian English writers. Tapan Kumar Ghosh rightly says:
It is this balanced combination of contemporary experience and aspiration for transcendence that gives Joshi's novel a place of distinction in post-Independence Indian fiction in English and accounts for its difference from Camus's novel that ends in an abyss of nihilism.\textsuperscript{27}

Joshi's next novel, \textit{The Last Labyrinth}, which is studied in the following chapter, examines the existentialist concerns altogether in a novel way.

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References

1. Sujatha Mathi, "I a'm a Stranger to My books", (The Times of India, July 1, 1983).


3. Arun Joshi, The Apprentice (New Delhi: Orient Paperback, 1974), 147. All further reference are to this edition. Page numbers are documented parenthetically immediately after the citation.


5. Ibid., 65.


11. Ibid. 201.


21. Ibid., 220.


