CHAPTER-VIII

Conclusion
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The foregoing analysis of Arun Joshi’s novels shows that he has been preoccupied with the problem of twentieth century man’s dilemma and its repercussions. In an age when religious faith is fast disappearing and man feels culturally uprooted and socially alienated on account of his own (mis)doings, the message of serious artists like Arun Joshi is most welcome and called for. In fact the gravity of spiritual crisis coupled with material affluence has created an unprecedented situation where cynicism has blurred the long cherished values of life. For lack of an intuitive discipline implanted in an affirmative attitude to the macrocosm and its happenings, modern man seems convinced of the purposelessness of his existence and its activities. Joshi’s protagonists represent a cross-section of humanity and this lends an authentic aura to his creative world.

As Hinduism attaches utmost value to the ‘right way to live’ and enjoins upon its followers to lead a responsible life, Arun Joshi appreciates much the commonplace of Indian spiritual discipline. Barret eventually regards it as the only concern of oriental wisdom:

...for the oriental, the only reason for bothering with philosophy is to find release or peace from the torments and perplexities of life...Philosophy is the soul's search for salvation...deliverance from suffering and evils of the material world.
Arun Joshi has candidly confessed his debt to Indian scriptures as extensively deliberated upon in the preceding pages. The journey of his heroes can be treated, to borrow a religious terminology, as a movement from ‘becoming’ to ‘being,’ from initial negation to final affirmation. In fact the truncated state of the protagonists is a first step towards the preparation for their metaphysical reconciliation and its resultant poise. They subject themselves to all kind of purgatorial experiences obviously trying to discover the secret of life in their distinctive ways in accordance with their individual accomplishments and angularities.

Joshi’s first three novels viz., The Foreigner, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas and The Apprentice deal with three ways of redemption as preached in The Bhagavadgita, the Karmayoga, the Jnayoga and the Bhaktiyoga respectively. Being orphaned at an early age, Sindi Oberoi, the hero of The Foreigner, develops an atheistic attitude to life and its problems. The unfortunate circumstances toss him from one set of blows to another and he appears to be wearied of his existence. His chance meeting with a catholic priest whose techings are identical to a Vedantin’s- “all love- whether of things, or persons, or oneself – was illusion and all pain sprang from this illusion” 2 marks a turning point in his career and he is prompted to accept the concept of Karmayoga, redemption through action without attachment. His subsequent joining
the Khemka’s firm on his visit to India provide him an opportunity to execute his realisation. By deciding to help the laborers in the factory and in their struggle of existence, he reaches the stage of affirmation, “sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved”.³

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* presents its protagonist as one who debunks the futility and imperfection of civilized society where sensitive persons are invariably inclined to feel alienated. Billy’s instinctive yearning for a meaningful life makes him a psychological case since he feels restive in an environment uncongenial to leading a life of peace and serenity. The process of dissatisfaction gets completed when he seduces Rima Kaul, “It gradually dawned upon me that a tremendous corrupting force was working on me. It was as though my soul was taking revenge on me for having denied it for long that other thing, that it had been clamouring for”.⁴ While in Sindi’s case it was his meeting with a spiritual man that marked a change in his personality, in Billy’s case it is otherwise. His headlong plunge into sensual pleasures opens his inner eye and he is in a position to make up his mind to move into a primitive world to seek his personal salvation and affirmation of the ‘other thing’ in his life — “that other thing was, and is, after all, what my life is all about”.⁵ Such realisation tantamount to redemption through knowledge,
*Jnanayoga* that dispels all false impressions about the reality of human situation.

The concept of salvation through devotion, *Bhaktiyoga* has been powerfully exemplified through the story of Ratan Rathor in *The Apprentice*. The novel’s main thrust is on the purification of the soul and also on the abiding values of humility and self-effacement in human life. The protagonist plans his life full of hope and ambitions and subjects himself to all pettiness but all expectations turn out to be otherwise. The realization that “one’s life has been a total waste”⁶ that dawns upon him after his friend’s death goads him to undergo penance. Ratan starts from the very lowest by dusting the shoes of the congregation outside the temple every morning like an apprentice with a desire “to learn.” The way which Ratan chooses for his purification, meets the vision of *Bhaktiyoga* which informs that the purification of self is not to be obtained by any ritual, or dogma but by service to mankind and prayer to God. Such an apprenticeship in humility arms man to face the challenges of life successfully.

Arun Joshi regards this world as a labyrinth, an intricate maze where man has to carve his way out for himself. That this is an extremely trying proposition is depicted in *The Last Labyrinth*. The thematic structure of the novel concentrates upon two coordinates- ‘huners of the
body' and 'hunegers of the spirit.' The protagonist Som Bhaskar's odyssey shows that he is torn between the diverse pulls of the spirit and the body. Life is so full of distractions like lust, greed, wrath and pride which serve as different layers of a labyrinth that man is most likely to get deviated from the right path of salvation. Should a man be sceptical by temperament, he is in for greater trouble as Som's responses to the situation of his life suggest. Lal Haveli, the locale of the novel itself is literal as well as metaphorical in its implications and serves as a fitting symbol of the world outside. All attempts undertaken by Anuradha and Gargi to bring a meaningful change in Som's way of life ultimately prove futile on account of his inbuilt suspicious nature and this only proves Gita's well-known dictum-"sanghayatma vinashyati" (a doubting Thomas is doomed to perish).

Arun Joshi's last novel The City And The River treats the tussle between 'allegiance to God' and 'allegiance to Man' as a recurring phenomenon in human history. Through its narrator the Great Yogeshwara the novelist brings forth the myth of sristi and pralaya and by implication satirises the alarmingly materialistic nature of existence. The novel seems to create the impression that the mundane values have started a war against the river, which stands for peaceful and ethereal aspect of the macrocosm. Unlike his earlier novels where the story
revolves round the protagonists, the two main characters in *The City And The River* viz., the Great Yogeshwara and the Grand Master represent two sets of values, as if they were the two options either of which man may choose in accordance with his perception of reality. The modifiers ‘Great’ and ‘Grand’ also suggest the quality of approach the two principal characters show in their conduct and activities. There are echoes of *The Bhagavadgita* in the narrator’s exposition that “this city, this world, all this is the manifestation of the one, and not the shadow of the Grand Master’s ego”. He further explains:

> But the Almighty can manifest through men only what men allow Him to manifest. This is why men and cities and nations must choose. There is the upward path that leads to freedom and there is the downward path that, for the moment at least, must lead to perdition.

It is remarkable that Joshi views money as a corrupting force throughout his novels. Be it Sindi Oberoi of *The Foreigner*—“America is a place for well-fed automations rushing out in automatic cars. I’d go mad if I had to do that” or Billy Biswas of *The Strange Case*—“I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than making and spending of money”. They are equally critical of and fed up with their apparently comfortable situations. Ratan Rather of *The Apprentice* coming as he does from an impoverished family has his own attractions
for material success, which ultimately lands him into trouble. However he comes to realise towards the close

My soul has killed. You put yours to pawn. But souls that were pawned could perhaps be retrieved.\(^\text{10}\)

The hero of *The Last Labyrinth* Som also reckons that material gains cannot necessarily bring solace to man.

The issues taken up by Joshi hammer on the consciousness of his readers about their own choice between the materialistic values and spiritual affirmation. His novels suggest that man’s metaphysical reconciliation is the only answer to all the agonies of his existence. They demonstrate that modern man may overcome his sense of uprootedness by self searching and introspection. Their instinctive yearning for affirmation and authenticity is a native cultural thrust, which most defines Indian metaphysical concerns. The protagonist reaches a critical point where he is in utter confusion, and then encounters a catastrophe which becomes the basis for his introspection and prompts him ultimately to reconcile to the world. The Great Yogeshwara’s exhortation has its own logic behind it:

...let not fear sow confusion in your heart. Whatever happens the Lord will not forsake you, nor will your work be fruitless. Be rest in peace. Be not afraid. All shall be well.\(^\text{11}\)
Such kind of faith meets the Kierkegaardian thought of “a metaphysic of hope” as well as the Hindu existential vision, which is essentially affirmative in character. A sensitive reader can identify himself with Joshi’s protagonists and scrutinise for himself the relevance of his daily struggles fraught with unnerving propositions. The significance of Arun Joshi’s creative output lies not simply in the number of volumes he has brought out, but in the quality of their authentic response to dilemmas that have been baffling humanity since the Fall.

Arun Joshi’s *leitmotif* in his novels is quest. We see how he works out the hopeless longings that drive all his heroes. Trilling rightly remarks that the novel is “a perpetual quest for reality” and “the most effective agent of the moral imagination” of the times. Through his novels, Joshi portrays the conflict of the contemporary Indian. His novels delineate the individual’s inner crises and consciousness. He is stimulated into writing, as he tells his interviewer Sujatha Mathai, to explore “that mysterious underworld, which is the human soul”. He further writes in his novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*: “Life's meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions, but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever”. His characters throughout their lives try to seek that meaning of life in the meaningless world. They are “The lost Lonely Questers” after the absurd in the dark night of the soul, in the dark
recesses of existence. His interviewer, Sujatha Mathai, has rightly stated: “He sees lives as labyrinths-hopeless mazes where you may get irretrievably lost or discover the shining secret at the core of life”.15

Arun Joshi honourably withdraws from the outer social reality and engages himself totally towards the exploration of the human soul, the inner psyche of the modern man. “His fiction is a quest for the essence of human living. The external world and reality emerge from the consciousness of the individuals. All his heroes are both Picaroes and pilgrims-Picaroes in their wanderings and pilgrims in their search for meaning of ‘Karma’, for the life force, for atonement, for the First Cause, for the Ultimate Truth, for God”.16

Joshi is also not like Mulk Raj Anand or R.K. Narayan, Kamala Markandaya or Bhabani Bhattacharya. He belongs to the tradition of existentialist writers like Camus, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Kafka, Marcel, Jaspers, Buber, Paul Tillich, Beckett, Saul Bellow and others. He has himself confessed:

I did read Camus and Sartre, I liked The Plague and read The Outsider. They might have influenced me. Sartre I did not understand clearly or like. As for existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, I have never understood anything except odd statements.17

Joshi, like other existentialists, is deeply concerned with man's plight and impropilos engendered by alienation and its concomitant angst
and agony. But he differs from the Western existentialist writers in the sense that in him the existentialist dilemma, the anguish of alienation and the absurdity of situation never remain the final predicament. His central motif is quest and all his characters are questers and seekers.

Joshi was obviously influenced not only by existentialist writers such as Camus, Sartre and Kierkegaard in the main, but also by a number of other Western novelists and poets such as Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, D.H.Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene, James Joyce, William Golding, William Wordsworth, S.T. Coleridge, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold, S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Malamud, Ralph Ellison, Arthur Miller, Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, Proust, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky.

But Joshi has taken these influences on his own terms. He has absorbed and assimilated all his influences, oriental as well as occidental, and fused them with the indigenous, transmuting them into organic, well-orchestrated novels with the indelible imprint of his own individuality. The Western writers provide Joshi with a stimulus, a body of suggestions as well as some narrative techniques that have been inconspicuously assimilated, forming an integral part of his native consciousness.

The issues that Joshi raises are the ones that concern the post Independence Indians with Western education. His novels are structured
in the immediately socio-cultural situations and are concerned with moral and spiritual problems of the contemporary Indians. The complex stresses and strains in the sensitive minds of his protagonists are the outcome of the dual forces of native ethos and Western influences. They suffer from uprootedness, cynicism, evils of materialism, loss of faith and identity crisis. In his fiction Joshi voices the concerns of the alienated and uncovers deep undercurrent of the agony of the contemporary Indian psyche. Joshi responds to the challenges of his time and the problems resulting from the bi-cultural milieu of the country. Joshi reveals a wholeness of vision by going into the cultural and spiritual problems of his own countrymen. Unlike the existentialists or his Western counterparts, living or dead, Joshi never accepts alienation as the ultimate condition of life. It is a transitional phase in the protagonist's quest for self-knowledge. Deeply influenced by the techniques of the Upanishads and the Gita, Joshi looks upon man's life on the earth as apprentice in soul making. His fiction is an expression of a distinctly Indian voice where one finds the richness of Indian heritage. Joshi's vision is essentially Hindu, and his novels are essentially reflective of the eternal existential situation of the beleaguered contemporary man.

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References


3. *Ibid*: 188


5. *Ibid*: 187


8. *Ibid*: 156


15. Sujatha Mathai, op.cit.,
