CHAPTER SEVEN
BY WAY OF SUMMING-UP

This final chapter brings to a close the modest attempt made in the preceding chapters to study analytically the important and recurrent theme of "self and society" in the novels of Arun Joshi. It remains to recapitulate in this chapter by way of a summing-up the main line of argument presented in the study. It is better to state here itself that no original or earthshaking findings have been made. However the novels of Joshi have been closely looked at from a thematic point of view.

Joshi is a novelist of distinction and his achievement is impressive, even though his output is moderate. His novels show a sensitive, deep and poignant awareness of the problems of human existence, and the moral and spiritual questions perplexing our times. The immediate context of his fiction is post-Independence India, but the relevance of his novels is universal. He is incisively aware of the sense of loneliness, isolation, estrangement and even alienation which the modern man is experiencing all the world over. But his approach to this vexed and vexing problem, which appropriately finds an important place in his novels, is different from that of the well-known existential writers of the West, notably Albert Camus, who emphasise the absurdity of all human existence. Joshi does not seek the absurd but goes beyond it in search of meaning and purpose in life, though he neither seeks nor is he satisfied with naïve or simplist answers. Therefore to read his novels through the spectacles of the Western existentialist thinkers and writers of the absurd, as it has been done by many an Indian critic, is of little help to understand them and their significance. That Joshi is influenced to some extent by the Western writers, Camus in particular, is not denied. There is no need for it. But it is important to recognise that he has
absorbed this and other influences, made them his own, and put them to different and original uses. His novels provide the proof for it.

The novels of Joshi are built on some recurrent themes such as quest for meaning and purpose in life, the imperative need to make moral choices in life however difficult and challenging, and the inescapable and inseparable relationship between self and society and the entailing personal and social responsibility. These are his major themes, and there are minor ones too, man-woman relationship for instance. Actually all these are inter-related and interdependent themes and run through all the novels in different forms. What is more, the quest for meaning and purpose subsumes all the others, and invariably has to be given attention whatever be the theme in Joshi's novels one may choose to discuss. Of his major themes, however, there is something special about the self-society interaction or dialectic (if it could be called that). Because society has a very important role in an individual's life. First, it meets one of man's deepest need, to relate himself to the outside world and to belong, so that he may avoid loneliness, isolation and estrangement. Next, in the regeneration as well as degeneration of the self it has its influential part to play. In today's world, this relationship between self and society has become problematic for various reasons. Thirdly, most quests take place and most choices are exercised in the environs of a society or a social context rather than in ascetic seclusion.

Joshi probes this theme in view of its importance, in all his novels beginning with The Foreigner. There is variety and no repetition in his handling of it. In each novel he imaginatively explores and recreates in fictional terms the theme from a fresh angle and in a new situation. He is not a committed writer and has no axe to grind. He does not write with any set and fixed notions or previously determined doctrines or formulas or theory, to
impose on the reader. All his novels, however, imply the need for a spiritual anchor and basis for life, which can be found in the tradition and heritage of the land. Joshi’s perspective and horizon widen and a decisive growth towards maturity in his art and vision may be perceived from novel to novel. From the claustrophobic world of The Foreigner his first novel, he moves towards the larger world of humanity and beyond. as it here from the limited man-centred temporal world towards the God-centred universe.

Among Joshi’s novels, the first four - The Foreigner, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, The Apprentice, and The Last Labyrinth- have human protagonists, and they are all protagonistic novels. However in The City and the River, his fifth and final novel, the focus is on the city, the river, and the human community in general rather than any particular individual. The protagonists of the first four novels – Sindi Oberoi, Billy Biswas, Ratan Rathor, and Som Bhaskar – begin as troubled and agonised individuals and experience, each in his own distinct way, estrangement from society and the consequent sense of loneliness and isolation because of their personal dilemmas and obsessions. Sindi, Billy, and Ratan are able to return to the fold of society after some time and integrate themselves with it with a fuller knowledge of themselves and their world, and a heightened awareness to their responsibility to themselves and to their society. In the process they also discover for themselves the meaning and purpose of life, and learn to relate themselves meaningfully to the outside world. Som however remains lonely and estranged, trapped in the labyrinths of his unresolved doubts and questions about life, and obstinately refuses to try the paths open to him to find meaning in life and existence. He remains an anguished outsider to society and the world.
Som Bhaskar is a multi-millionaire industrialist and highly educated intellectual. He finds himself lost in the maze of self-absorption. Sindi Oberoi belongs to a different social stratum. Born of mixed parentage, orphaned very early in his childhood, he grows up without, tradition and culture. He feels that he cannot belong anywhere. Certain painful experiences and disappointments make him live for a time a life of withdrawal, escape and inaction which he mistakes for philosophical detachment and non-involvement. But he is able to transform himself, under the pressure of fresh experiences, into a person of active and responsible involvement in the life of the community feeling an honest concern for others rather than his own egotistical self. From self-absorption he moves into social participation without regard to its results. Life becomes meaningful for him because of his integration with society. Billy of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* presents a different but a profoundly meaningful integration with society, after much struggle and experience of acute estrangement from family and society. Wholly alienated from the well-to-do, sophisticated and superficial society of the upper class of Delhi to which he belongs, and possessed by a devastating apathy for its false values of life and philistine tastes, he abandons that world and joins a primitive tribe. He seeks and finds among the tribals a sense of community as well as his identity as a human being. And his integration with the tribe helps him to quest something beyond the limited human world. From a sordid and meaningless existence of getting and spending money in the so-called civilized world, Billy escapes into the tribal society to live a meaningful life. In this society the self merges with the community without losing its essential identity and integrity.

Unlike Sindi, Billy and Som, Ratan Rathor of *The Apprentice* is an average man of average intellectual abilities. Having lived exclusively for himself for several years in the pursuit of a career, and compromising in the process the values he had inherited from his
father and cherished, he becomes lonely and estranged from the community. He accumulates an unbearable burden of guilt. Finally he has to realise that he cannot live for himself and that whatever he does has its inevitable consequences, which are bound to affect others in the community. Chastened from honest introspection and analysis of his entire career and his motives he comes to realise that he must purify himself first in a spirit of humanity, and that there is no escape from society and responsibility towards it. Further responsible participation in the life of his society free from all self-regarding thoughts of gain or loss, makes his life meaningful and purposeful. This realisation helps him to regain the integrity of his self.

Joshi’s insight into character is remarkable. He takes the whole man rather than an aspect of him into account. Concerned as the first four novels are with the exploration of the self in relation to society and its attempt to know itself, they have a psychological depth which several modernist Indian novels in English do not have.

The City and the River, which marks a departure from Joshi’s other novels, presents the theme of self and society from a new angle. The focus is shifted from highly idiosyncratic individual selves, their dilemmas and perplexities, to social groups consisting of a variety of individuals. The city and the river, which are not given specific names, represent all cities and rivers, and therefore together they stand for the world in general, and the human community itself with its conflicting groups of people. The novel unravels the motives, choices and actions of those who live in the city and those who live by the river, which often sharply conflict with one another, and the disintegrating and ruinous effect they have on their destiny and their city because of the wrong choices made and courses of action adopted by those in power. Joshi is primarily concerned with the normal and
spiritual aspects of the situation rather than its narrow and limited political view of it. As the Great Yogeshwara, who narrates the story to his disciple puts it, whatever be the realm of activity, man has to decide to whom does he owe his allegiance, man or God. Though the novel speaks in terms of groups, the individual self is not lost sight of, and ultimately it is the individual who has to exercise his choice. Viewed as a whole, the novel is about humanity itself and the spiritual values that should inform and guide individuals as well as social groups.

All the novels of Arun Joshi manifest his deep concern for life, so essential for any earnest creative writer. This concern in him is matched by an equally serious interest in the form and narrative strategies of fiction. He has justly earned the reputation that he is one of the small number of Indian novelists in English who have concerned themselves with question of narrative. His first four novels are protagonistic and confessional. But in each novel Joshi uses a variation of the confessional narrative appropriate to its theme. There is considerable sophistication in his use of different narrative strategies. The modes he employs in The Apprentice and The Last Labyrinth are something new in Indian fiction in English. In Joshi his narrative strategies eminently serve his serious thematic concerns. In the present study of the theme of self and society in his novels, to draw attention to this important aspect of his work, instead of the order in which the novels appeared, a slightly different order is adopted. Those, which employ the first-person confessional mode of narration are considered first and then the last novel of Joshi in which the third-person omniscient narration is employed is examined. A detailed study of his narrative strategies and the rationale behind them would be rewarding.

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