CHAPTER THREE
FROM ESTRANGEMENT TO COMMUNITY
A STUDY OF THE APPRENTICE

The Apprentice is wholly set in India unlike The Foreigner and The Strange Case of Billy Biswas which span different countries and continents. Its protagonist Ratan Rathor is entirely homespun, his birth, upbringing and education all being wholly Indian, unlike the protagonists of the other novels Joshi. Its action covers mainly the years between 1947 the year of Indian independence and 1962 the year of the India-China war, while it takes briefly into account some of the happenings during the years of the struggle for independence. In a sense, the broader topic of the novel is the confusion and turmoil of a whole generation of people between independence and India’s debacle in the war with China. It makes a telling commentary on the decay of all values in public and private life in the country. Therefore it is necessary to remark at the outset itself about The Apprentice that what in all likelihood would have been in lesser hands a socio-political tract or treatise with a slender story attached to it, or a mere journalistic reportage on the corrupt, degenerated and degenerating post-independence India, and on the causes for its plight, becomes in the deft hands of Arun Joshi a competent work of fiction and an absorbing novel of abiding human interest. With its focus on character and situation it imaginatively recreates in concrete fictional terms the prevailing situation. But more importantly, it gives us the actual feel of what it is for an ordinary individual of average intelligence who is sensible, basically good and well-meaning, justifiably ambitious of a career but confused for want of a clear sense of right and wrong and a sense of direction to his life, lacking in courage and self-confidence, to live and survive in a society which is corrupt to the core and “without norms, without direction, without even perhaps, a purpose”.1

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Ratan Rathor the protagonist of The Apprentice narrates his own story. He is the son of an idealistic Gandhian father known for his honesty and integrity, who sacrifices all including his life in the struggle for freedom, and a consumptive mother who is worldly-wise and places money over and above everything else. Caught between these two antithetical personalities, Ratan early in his life finds himself in an unresolved dilemma. After much desperate struggle he begins his career in Delhi as a temporary petty clerk in a government office. Soon he is possessed by the career itch. Gradually he rises to become an important enough officer, by making a series of compromises and adopting dubious means to safeguard his career and advancement. He establishes himself as a successful and efficient but corrupt official in a setup where corruption is the rule rather than the exception. At the time of the India-China war of 1962, he clears defective war material for a huge bribe, which results in the death of a very large number of Indian soldiers in the battlefront. Later, to protect himself, he even lets down with little qualms his best friend and benefactor the Brigadier, who threatened with a court martial for no fault of his, commits suicide. Ratan regrets and undertakes a penitential exercise.

This outline of Ratan’s story necessarily oversimplifies it. If this were all it would have no particular interest, and be no different from many such stories of social and political corruption one reads about almost everyday. However, as Arun Joshi recreates with imaginative insight the circumstances which lead to the rise and fall and recovery of Ratan, and graphs his inner tensions, conflicts and torment, the novel becomes a penetrating study of a man of guilt who suffers terrible loneliness, isolation, estrangement from friends and society, loss of identity, inability to communicate with anyone and such other agonising
consequences of a guilty conscience, and who also strives hard to redeem and expiate himself. The novel lays out adequately the horrors that harbour the protagonist's soul, which becomes the battleground for good and evil which masquerade as pursuit of career. The novelist takes care to give due importance to the socio-political matrix of the protagonist, so that the novel convincingly presents the portrait of an individual as well as the aggregate of the lapses and failures of a whole generation. And Ratan serves as a typical example of his generation. However, as the focus remains steadily on him he emerges as a distinct and complex individual. The essence of the novel is in tracing his confusion, inner turmoil and torment, and his effort to recover his integrity and reunite himself with his society.

The title of the novel, seemingly prosaic, in fact provides a clue to its nature and significance. It was seen in the previous chapter how Arun Joshi enlarges the meaning of the word “foreigner” to include various kinds of alienation and estrangement, geographical, social, personal, psychological and spiritual, all of which are experienced by Sindi Oberoi of *The Foreigner*. Similarly *The Apprentice* deepens the meaning of the familiar word ‘apprentice’ to encompass the entire endeavour of the protagonist to learn how to live a life both meaningful and purposeful, in the best sense of the term, in a society where all values seem to have collapsed and there is apparently none to guide, no master to whom one can attach himself for guidance and a sense of direction. An apprentice is “a person who is learning a trade by being employed in it for an agreed period at low wages,” “a beginner, a novice”.² He is essentially a diligent learner of a skill, craft, or trade leading to a vocation in the sense of a profession, a means of livelihood. But to an earnest learner, whether of a craft or art, the process of learning can be never-ending. No one with any conscience can
ever say that he has fully mastered what he set out to learn. In this sense he remains a beginner, a novice who has miles to go. For such a person learning itself becomes a vocation, an all-absorbing activity which gives meaning and significance to his life. Joshi employs the word 'apprentice' in this extended sense in this novel.

Ratan the apprentice of the novel himself explains in what sense he regards himself an apprentice in his middle age, and the nature, purpose and goal of the apprenticeship he has been devoutly pursuing:

What am I apprenticed to? If I only exactly know? --- if an approximation will do, you could say that I am learning to be of use. I know it is late in the day. But one must try and not lose heart, not yield, at any cost, to despair --- what is it to be of use? --- I have only a rough answer again --- I would be happy if I could do what I do as best as I can. Without vanity and without expectations and also without cleverness.¹

(emphasis added).

The full force and significance of these unadorned and unemphatic words of Ratan's becomes clear if one follows closely the different stages of his career through life. What he chooses to do as best he can is to "learn to wipe the shoes well" of the visitors to the temple everyday. He is fully aware how trying and humiliating this exercise can be. This unusual apprenticeship is not only not going to be easy but its results, which are expected to be mental, moral and spiritual, are not yielded easily and quickly either. Ratan is aware of it too. Having lived a life of false values for long, he has to educate himself from scratch in those true values of life which make life meaningful and purposeful. Further, to be of use not to himself but to others, the community and society, he has to forget himself and think
of others and his responsibility towards them. There is no end to this apprenticeship and Ratan may well remain an apprentice all through his life.

The Apprentice explores the relation between self and society from an angle different from that of The Foreigner. Joshi once again demonstrates that there is no self without society and that they are mutually dependent. However much one may feel alienated or estranged from it, one has to return to it and accept one’s responsibilities and obligations to it for one’s own good as well as that of society. Sindi Oberoi had no roots anywhere and withdrawn himself from all involvement in society until he could identify himself with Muthu and others of the Khemka enterprises, view himself as one among them, and participate in their lives by helping them. Ratan on the other hand belongs to a nation and enjoys the security provided by his family and society in which he has his roots. But he feels alienated and estranged from them for a time partly because of his circumstances and largely because of what he does and fails to do for want of a sense of direction and strength of conviction to choose the right course of action which is open to him. He develops a sense of guilt which increases and becomes an intolerable burden as time passes by, filling his soul with anguish and agony. Although he lives and moves amidst people, he feels lonely, morally isolated and estranged from them all, and even from his essential self. He has none to communicate with to share his fears, failures and dilemmas. He feels guilty and lonely because he becomes a social and moral deviant. His redemption and rehabilitation in society becomes possible only when he confesses without reserve all his misdeeds and makes a clean breast of himself to someone who understands and judges him without bias.
To tell all without withholding anything relevant becomes the sole and obsessive concern of Ratan. It is entirely voluntary and not suggested or demanded by anyone. He cannot resist the compulsion to confess as it comes from within, and serves as a therapeutic exercise for rigorous inner cleansing. His agony and confusion cannot be allayed and his sense of inner dislocation set right unless and until he admits all to the right person. His conscience, both witness and judge of all his deeds and misdeeds, would not let him feel free until he has vigorously and thoroughly examined all his thoughts, motives and actions, however awkward, embarrassing and painful. Appropriately Joshi casts Ratan’s story as a first-person confessional narrative and makes the protagonist himself tell his story from his point of view. Ratan makes his confession to a young student, an N.C.C. cadet, who has come to Delhi a couple of months in advance of the Republic Day to participate in its parade. He is alert, intelligent, sympathetic but sceptical, and as yet untainted by the rot affecting his society. In the process of telling his story to this young man whom he meets by chance, Ratan tries to clarify to himself precisely what causes led to his own moral downfall. He also raises a number of pertinent questions which he had asked himself sporadically on occasions and had not found satisfactory answers to them. Thereby he is able to achieve a clarity of perception of himself, his society and the world in so far as an average man of his kind can achieve. The opportunity to talk frankly and at length over some weeks to his listener enables Ratan to regain his ability to communicate, his sense of community with his society, and his responsibility towards it. He feels regenerated and his faith in himself restored.

In his retrospective narrative Ratan has to recall, though not in tranquillity, many of his past experiences and reconstruct them to present a connected narrative of his life to his listener. However a middle-aged man’s recollection of his experiences, especially those of
his adolescence and youth, are apt to some degree to be different from the actual experiences. Thereby the authenticity of the recollections may become doubtful. Therefore the recalling and narrating self has to keep itself judiciously apart from the experiencing self. This is a problem that all autobiographical narrators have to encounter and resolve. Ratan tides over it more or less successfully, because of his intention to give a candid and truthful an account of his life as possible. For well over a year he has meditated over his life, examined it critically and assessed himself with sufficient detachment. He has realised the value of humility and his own insignificance, and been looking for an appropriate listener to the story of his life.

Ratan’s confession of his guilt to a stranger reminds one of the aged Mariner who tells the story of his guilt to a wedding guest in Coleridge’s great poem The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. The similarities have been noticed and commented upon, notably by Tapan Kumar Ghosh⁴. But he tends to equate Ratan and Mariner in their experience of guilt, confession and redemption. But there are also important differences to be noted, in addition to the similarities. It is true that both bear a burden of guilt and are anxious to dislodged it and be redeemed by an honest confession. Their guilt isolates and estranges them from society. What is worse, they experience an unutterable loneliness. The urge to confess is irresistible in both so that they may be cleansed by penitent confession. But their manner of confession, the auditors to whom they tell their stories, and the final outcome of the exercise are different. The Mariner is under a supernatural compulsion to confess. But he is not free to choose his listener. The wedding guest whom he addresses abruptly is predestined to be his listener. Neither the Mariner can escape confessing to him nor his listener can escape listening to him and absorbing silently the implication of the tale. The
Mariner is cursed to be an eternal wanderer repeating his gruesome tale to predestined listeners. Yet there is no assurance that he would be completely redeemed on this side of the grave.

Ratan, unlike the Mariner looks for an appropriate listener for his story and waits for months to find one though things “burnt inside his skull, simmered in slow fire” for long. He wants one who is alert, understanding and sympathetic, and at the same time sceptical enough not to swallow blindly all that he says, because he wants to be judged. When he sees the young cadet unexpectedly on a Sunday evening near the Krishna temple, he senses in him perhaps the listener he has been waiting for, and makes his acquaintance at once. If the Mariner begins at once and abruptly to tell his story to his listener almost at a breathless pace and completes it at one sitting, Ratan narrates his at his own pace over some weeks and in several instalments. That seems appropriate because his disintegration was gradual unlike the Mariner’s. He intends to trace the stages by which he descended into a life of corruption and got settled in it, because there was a time when he was innocent and had a sense of honour and some courage. It is his fond hope that the story of his corruption would serve as a warning to the younger generation on whom the future of the nation depends.

There is nothing in Ratan’s mode of narration to suggest that he makes deliberately calculated moves to make the young man listen to his confession with attention, despite his anxiety that he should. For the Mariner telling his story is a part of the punishment for his crime. Every time he tells it he has to relive in imagination the horror of it. Ratan too goes through a similar experience but he on his own tells his story to atone himself. Further, by the time he buttonholes the young man, the process of his redemption has already begun as
he has been regularly at the penitent and purificatory shoe shining near the temple. Of course, at the end of his narration he is not a fully redeemed man. Redemption is always a long-drawn out process for anyone, and one has to work out his salvation with diligence. However Ratan can hope to be fully redeemed in God's good time, and his confession itself is a part of the journey towards it. Significantly, when he completes his story, he is hardly thinking of himself or his future. His thoughts are on the younger generation and its future, as it has to confront and survive in a degenerating society. He becomes a reliable narrator of his life as he avoids the extremes of self-defense and excessive and melodramatic self-condemnation.

First-person confessional narratives are not new to Indian English novelists. But the narrative strategy that Arun Joshi adopts in The Apprentice is certainly something new in the Indian context, and justly invites scrutiny. The novel is shaped as a series of Browning-like dramatic monologues spoken by the protagonist-narrator to a listener. These monologues form its narrative body. This strategy has certain definite advantages. It enables the protagonist-narrator to tell his dark story uninterrupted and thus reconstruct and present a connected narrative of his life from the distant past to the present. Secondly, it helps the novelist to present dramatically the protagonist's confrontation with his own self, inner and outer, probe directly into his psyche and lay it bare for the reader to see it without the mediation of another person. It conveys best the protagonist's sense of inner compulsion and urgency to communicate and confess, and gives the entire narrative a like urgency.
All of Ratan's monologues are naturally addressed to the listener. But he addresses himself too, especially when his narration takes an introspective turn and dwells on such recurrent questions about right, wrong, God etc. On the whole the monologues sustain the tone, impression and atmosphere of an oral narrative addressed to a single listener. They also retain the language, the pace, and even the gestures of a man talking to his single listener. The role of this listener in the narrative which is chiefly spoken to him has not been properly understood by some critics. He is not just "an imaginary companion" whom "the narrator addresses now and then" "to break the monotony" of the narration, as supposed by Srinath,6 (Joy Abraham7 endorses this opinion). Nor is he "just passive" who listens, while "the narrator himself puts the questions and expresses the doubts that may arise in the listener's mind", as Prasad8 thinks. In fact he has a visible and active role to play all along the narrative. He is an alert and intelligent listener and gets genuinely interested in Ratan's story as it progresses. He responds to it sensitively. His active presence is felt throughout the narration. That he listens attentively to Ratan and punctuates the narrative every now and then by raising intelligent questions, although his voice is audible only to the narrator and not to us, are all implicit in the very manner Ratan tells his story, the turns it takes and the emphasis it acquires now and then. After all, the convention of the monologue requires that there is only one audible speaker. It does not follow necessarily that the audience is or should be passive and silent. Ratan only repeats the questions raised by his young friend.

In all oral narration, its continuity, development and success depends upon the interest evinced by the listener, the narrator's confidence in him and in his own ability to establish rapport with him. The questions implicitly raised by the auditor also form a part of the narrative. By asking the right questions at the appropriate moments Ratan's listener
helps him to maintain the continuity of the story. Further, whenever he tends to digress or
go off at a tangent from the main story, the young man's questions bring him back into it.
To cite one of several instances in the novel, the most difficult and painful part of Ratan's
narrative is his betrayal of the Brigadier. Ratan, no doubt, mentions the Brigadier and
elaborates on their long and loving friendship since their boyhood. But as he approaches
the crucial moments of his guilty story, he unconsciously tends to digress from it or delay
its narration. At such moments the patient and alert listener pulls him back by simply
reminding him of the Brigadier and asking him about his fate. By such interventions the
young man effectively becomes a responsive and responsible participant in the narrative.

Moreover, it would defeat the very purpose of Ratan's confession if he were to tell
his story to a passive listener. In fact in telling his story he has three objectives in view.
First, it should enable him to establish meaningful communication which has been denied
him by his guilt and sense of loneliness and isolation. Secondly, it should help him in
cleansing his conscience and redeem him of the burden of guilt. And thirdly it is equally
important for him that his story told with candour should serve as a salutary warning to the
younger generation which is not yet sullied by the corruption of the older generation, and on
whom the future of the nation depends, because it is capable of idealism, respect for values
and social responsibility. This last objective is as urgent as it is important for Ratan. This
urgency is conveyed in his mode of narration. He is as much concerned with the moral
health of his people and his society as his own redemption and expiation. And hence long
wait for the right young man to be his listener, as yet uncorrupted, receptive and responsive
to noble ideals and principles.
To avoid the monotony of listening to a single voice in a series of monologues, Joshi uses certain devices. First he varies the duration and length of the monologues. The first few are short and brief, and more or less introductory. As the narrative progresses and its contents become tangled and complex making it difficult for Ratan to speak with ease and clarity, the monologues tend to become long. In fact the varying lengths of the monologues indicate the pattern of the narration as well as the narrator’s state of mind. Further the monologist Ratan is made to report faithfully, often in their own words, his conversation with different people. This device brings into the monologues several other voices – those of Ratan’s parents, the Brigadier, Ratan’s companions in the sarai, his colleagues in his office, the Sheikh, the police officials, the young listener etc – so that one is hardly aware that he is listening to a monologist. By these devices the attention of the reader is held and the narrative interest is sustained from first to last.

There are certain recognisable similarities in the narrative strategy and content between The Apprentice and Albert Camus’s The Fall [La Chute]. Therefore Rajendra Prasad has asserted that The Apprentice is closely modelled on The Fall. Gopal Reddy is content to hold that “one may unmistakably find in The Apprentice the impact of The Fall”. Regarding their similarities, both are confessional novels and employ the strategy of monologic narration. Their protagonists, Ratan and J-B. Clamence, confess in detail their hypocrisy, cowardice, clandestine activities, frustration and failures, and in short their moral degeneration. In the process they also unravel the widespread corruption of their times and hold disquieting mirrors to the collapse of moral values in their societies. If Joshi has borrowed the monologic technique from Camus he has made a significant variation rather than an imitation of it, and puts the device to a different use from that of Camus, his
own artistic intention being different. Therefore there is not enough ground to assess that Joshi has closely modelled his novel on Camus's. In fact Ratan and J-B Clamence are conceived differently by their creators, and the difference is fundamental. How Ratan chooses his listener has already been seen. Clamence, who describes himself as a 'judge-penitent', actually intrudes upon a Frenchman sitting at the next table at the bar and buttonholes him to listen to his story. Ratan attempts to tell his story candidly without any concealment, pretence and histrionics. He thus becomes a reliable narrator. Though he dwells on the corruption of his times and society, he holds only himself responsible for his misdeeds and tries to make amends for them.

To such artlessness and frankness, honesty and determination as Ratan's to "tell all", J-B Clamence is a stranger. Unlike Ratan he is an intellectual and conscious of it. He is subtle and cunning too. For all the forthrightness he exhibits to get his auditor interested in his story of misdemeanours and traits, he is a deliberately deceptive narrator. He himself says unabashedly, "it's very hard to disentangle the true from the false in what I'm saying". His trade sign would be "a double face, a charming Janus, with the motto: 'Don't rely on it'". Seemingly, as Wayne C. Booth shows, he "strips himself of all pretences to virtue, uncovering more and more of his empty, vicious pride as he goes", so that he "can trick both his auditor and reader into undergoing the same spiritual collapse that he himself has experienced". His "failure to meet his own grand moral crisis, when he once refused to go to the aid of drowning suicide becomes our general failure to accept moral responsibility". Ultimately, Clamence wants to bring out the 'fundamental duplicity of the human being'. There is no need to labour the point that Ratan in his intention as well
as performance as a confessor is at the opposite end. In creating Clamence Camus is concerned with the problem of honesty especially in confession.

It is very important for Ratan’s purpose that the young man to whom he tells his story becomes a willing and interested listener so that he may experience its full impact. He recounts his story in twelve instalments, more or less chronologically. To serve his specific objectives, which have been noted already, he selects only those details of his life which are strictly relevant and bear out the essential truth about him. He focuses on what he feels inwardly and on those events and persons who have affected him. Approximately four phases may be discerned in his life. The first covers his early life of innocent boyhood, youth and idealism, lived in a small town in the Punjab, under the protective care of his nationalist and Gandhian father and his practical mother. The first four monologues cover this phase of his life. The next four cover Ratan’s search for employment in Delhi, his trials, travails and frustrations, having found a job his becoming wholly obsessed with his career, and his turning unscrupulous in his relentless pursuit of it, compromising the ideals he had been brought up upon. During this phase begins his prolonged and increasing experience of acute isolation, estrangement and loneliness, more mental than physical, which harass him despite his professional success and advancement.

The next phase of Ratan’s life is the most revealing. It tells of his steep moral fall, as if into a bottomless pit, not only does he get involved in shady transactions but betrays his best friend and benefactor, the Brigadier, whose life he could certainly have saved had he chosen to admit his guilt in time and establish his friend’s innocence. As a result the long and accumulating guilt now becomes an intolerable burden. He feels trapped within
himself with none to communicate with, or confide in and share his agony and disillusionment. His conscience remains awake and keeps on warning him in its squeaking voice against the road to moral ruin he has chosen. This phase of his life is graphed by monologues nine to eleven. Monologue twelve, the last and longest and the most important, has for its burden Ratan’s experience of grief, remorse and repentance after his friend’s suicide, and his determined attempts to atone for his crimes. All the monologues, as it may be seen, are inter-linked, continuous, and together form a unified whole.

The opening monologue reveals a few significant facts. First of all is the Krishna temple. In its precincts Ratan performs his ritualistic shoe-shining every morning. It is here that he makes the acquaintance of the young man who becomes his listener. As many of the monologues are spoken in the temple vicinity, it serves as a significant backdrop to their conversation and also as a witness to the truth of Ratan’s confession. Secondly, this monologue reveals that the conversation takes place in winter, some few weeks before the Republic celebrations, after India’s debacle in the border war with China. Though the Republic Day is a day of national pride and celebration, this particular day in the context of Ratan’s story, has ironical implications. Because the celebration is actually an attempt, though feeble, to cover up the ignominy of India’s defeat in the recent war. It is one of many instances of self-deception and hypocrisy of those in power in the country that the novel exposes. It is clear from this monologue that Ratan gets to know the young man by chance and not by design. His asking Ratan for direction to reach the “Grounds” sets the series of monologues into motion.
From the second monologue onwards, which is spoken a week after the first, Ratan’s confessional story is gradually unfolded. He talks to his new acquaintance informally without appearing to be too eager to know all about him or tell him all about himself, although soon after getting to know him Ratan must have found in him the most appropriate listener to his story. First, he builds up a close rapport with the young man before he ventures to tell him his story and getting him to be interested in it. In the first few monologues Ratan succeeds in rousing his interest in his story. If there is any advance planning as such in his narration, it is chiefly in them.

The young man, who too belongs to the Punjab, reminds Ratan of his own father, how he lived and why he sacrificed his life. So he tells him briefly about his father and mother. His father abandoned his fairly lucrative legal practice, gave away most of his wealth to follow the path of Gandhiji in the struggle for freedom. His worldly-wise mother was indignant at her husband’s folly. Ratan as a boy was “a witness to this differences”, which left its deep impress on his character and influenced the course of his life. As he grows older the memory of his father and his significance for him “grows more compelling every day”. In his brief conversation with his young friend, Ratan in passing refers to the India-China war, India’s loss of honour, and the government’s determination “to defend our honour”. The ominous significance of it, and his incidental remark that “it is difficult to retrieve honour, once it is lost”, becomes clear later when his story is fully told. For it has deep implications for the nation as well as himself. It anticipates the twists and turns Ratan’s life takes to drive home to him the true meaning of “honour”, and how to be a man of honour.
Ratan’s narrative takes shape and progresses as he recalls significant event after significant event, as directed by the moment of confession and the association of memories it rouses. It gathers urgency and momentum as he proceeds, its direction guided by the questions raised by the listener, especially when Ratan tends to digress. From the third monologue his confession gets into its stride. He begins casually with a nostalgic reference to his carefree youthful days in the company of his friend. Thus he makes the first ever mention of the Brigadier who has always been on his conscience for betraying him. As the later monologues show, the most difficult part of Ratan’s task is to describe this heinous act of his. But at this stage, he does not know how to go about it. Moreover he has to muster all courage first to narrate it without distortion and prepare his auditor to listen to it properly so that he may grasp fully its implications. Since his young friend does not know anything about the Brigadier, he resumes tentatively with, “Between the Brigadier and me there were other things too”, but hesitates to elaborate at this moment. Instead, he reverts to talking about his own father in some detail, as the cadet wanted to know how he was killed, feeling perhaps relieved to have an excuse to digress.

Ratan dwells on the circumstances that led to his father’s martyrdom, and admits that he is yet to understand its full significance. Towards the end of his narrative he reveals that it is driven home to him by a most unexpected person, the Sheikh, whom he mentions now incidentally. He vividly describes how the satyagrahis comprising “multitudes, yellow with dust, ragged poor people” who had come from distant villages voluntarily in the blazing sun to participate in the procession led by his father. They were all “a non-descript” crowd, but on that occasion they were “transformed --- into something grand, something more than what the wretched of the earth are normally allowed to become”. The boy
Ratan too, excited and frightened, jumped into the crowd and found himself close to his father. As he watched, his father was beaten by the police when he was trying to calm the beaten marchers, and later was shot dead at close range for defying the police command not to move. Ratan was a witness to his father's martyrdom. This extraordinary moment of his courage and sacrifice was "frozen" in his memory "as a moment of great silence" (emphasis added). This traumatic experience remaineed at the back of his mind throughout his career to remind him of his own cowardice and betrayal of his father's ideals of courage, honesty and integrity in life. His description of this overpowering incident is remarkable for its vividness and reticence. Lest he should break down with this recollection of his father's death, Ratan diverts his attention. However he refers to "a friend" in passing, apart from his father and the Brigadier, who affected him profoundly later. Perhaps it is the approach of the night and the descending dense smog and darkness that remind him of the Sheikh, the "prince of the underworld" who too is dead. By the end of this monologue (the third) Ratan has introduced into his narrative the chief figures of his life — his father and mother, the Brigadier, and the Sheikh — all of whom leave their impress upon him.

When Ratan and his young friend meet again, it is clear that the latter has become an interested and eager listener. Ratan now tells him a little more about the Brigadier, "probably the only true friend I ever had". The occasion for it is the war with China, and the many pointless speeches made and platitudes indulged in by ignorant officials and politicians alike, and the Brigadier's unillusioned and realistic view of it. The Brigadier, every inch a soldier, had known wars and was wounded several times. But this war with China worried him because "he knew, they would not win" and "he feared --- the humiliation of defeat". To the implicit question of the listener about the Brigadier, Ratan
merely says that he was not killed in the war. But he does not choose to say what actually happened to him after the war was over, probably because the Brigadier’s was no ordinary death, and the auditor has to know much more about the relationship between Ratan and Brigadier, and the deplorable changes that came about Ratan to understand the significance of his betrayal of his friend, and the magnitude of his guilt. He recalls nostalgically the days when he and the Brigadier grew together as carefree young men playing hockey, cycling, and swimming, talking of everything under the sun, and enjoying innocent fun. The Brigadier once saved his life too when he was ambushed and beaten by some boys. The irony of recalling this incident at this moment becomes evident to the listener later when Ratan reveals that he betrayed the friend in need, when he needed his help most.

Soon Ratan was to move away from this pastoral life of innocence, spontaneous friendship and security, as yet untainted by selfish interests and ambitions, to go to Delhi to earn his livelihood. Before he embarked on this second phase of his life, when he was still in his hometown, memory of his father’s self-sacrifice still fresh in his mind, he toyed with the idea of joining the “Movement” rather than seek a career. The “sheer heroism of its contents” appealed to him. His mother who never minced words told him not to make a fool of himself, but think of earning money. “It was not patriotism but money that brought respect and bought security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all failed. There were many laws --- but money was law unto itself”. Though this advice finally prevailed, he would not give up at once his ambition to follow his father’s example little realising that he never had his father’s mental and moral equipment, his tough moral fibre, will and selflessness. Swept off his feet by his vaporous enthusiasm and patriotism, he thought of joining Subhas Bose’s army to fight the British, dreaming of fame, greatness,
and a glorious future. Having gone some distance towards the secret recruiting centre, he became afraid of failure and returned home, though ashamed of his own cowardice. In retrospect he is struck by the stupidity and absurdity of this heroic adventure of his and its humiliation. This episode reveals his innate timidity, cowardice and inner deficiency, and also his absorption in himself when he was supposed to be thinking of the nation’s cause.

When they meet next, Ratan tells his auditor about the next phase of his life when he was flung unawares from the world of youthful inexperience, impractical idealism, dreams of honour and greatness, into the world of harsh realities where the notions of right and wrong, honour, usefulness and service he had been taught were treated with cynical indifference and contempt. Though disappointed with himself for having failed to join Bose’s army, Ratan with youthful optimism hoped that something “dramatic” would occur and that he would be “called” to do great things. To Delhi, “a city of opportunities”, he made his way confident of getting a suitable job with the help of those known to his father. And he expected to make a mark in the world, a mark as visible and striking as (his) father’s. Disappointed by every one of them, he had to make his own efforts to find a job to be hopelessly disappointed there again. Of necessity he had to stay in a cheap Sarai with five others, all working men and illiterate except one who was a stenographer. Ratan was struck by the sheer contrast between himself and them. They all “worked, earned, spent”, while he, “the most educated of them all”, was tirelessly tramping without a job in sight.

Ratan of course enjoyed their company, but the snob in him could not be wholly comfortable in their inferior company. He, now repentant, confesses his dilemma to his listener. He considered himself their better in education, polish, and intelligence. But he
also knew that such men as these “formed the backbone of (his) father’s processions and were always the first to be teargassed or shot in the stomach”.\textsuperscript{27} But he dreaded that he might remain forever in their company since all his efforts to find a job were in vain. To cover up his confusion and sustain his mask of superiority, he pretended to have found a job and told them tall stories about it. Only later in life in self-scrutiny he realised the enormous damage he had done himself by what then seemed to be harmless lying. He tells his listener:

--- without quite knowing or consciously planning for it I had added a new dimension to my life. I had become, at the age of twenty one, a hypocrite and a liar; in short a sham --- for once I had lied about having a job I had to lie about numerous other things, like food, clothing, why I did not want to go to the Cinema and so on. From morning till night I told more lies than truths. I had become a master fake.\textsuperscript{28}

Harmless though it seemed then, faking could become in course of time a habit and make one an inveterate liar. In the light of Ratan’s subsequent course of life and his hot pursuit of a career, his innocent lying could be seen as marking the beginning of his apprenticeship to a life of deception and corruption.

The sheer exhaustion of searching for a job in vain and the humiliation experienced in most places resulted in Ratan’s falling seriously ill. During his illness his sarai companions, the very people whom he regarded as his inferiors, looked after him until he got well. This ought to have been an eye-opener to him. But instead he felt embarrassed. An additional humiliation was that during his illness all his pretensions of having a job were revealed. But his companions made no fuss about it and thought that his pretence was
pointless. Ironically the stenographer, one of no particular consequence, finally found for Ratan the position of a temporary clerk in a department of war purchase.

Once employed, the self-centred snob in Ratan became active again. He moved out of the sarai and into lodgings “appropriate” to his “class”. As a sop to his conscience he told himself that he was of course thankful to his sarai friends for their help. But that did not mean that he should be associated with them for ever. After all he “was a different cut: educated, intelligent, cultured” and it was his “right” that he should “rise in life higher than the others aspired for”. Most scandalising was his moving house without talking leave of the turner who had taken care of him during his illness and who at that moment was away. He avoided all contact with his sarai mates but for an occasional meeting with the stenographer. With astonishing speed and without any compunction, he could turn his back upon them and forget altogether the spontaneous solidarity and solicitude they had shown him. He could even invent specious arguments to justify himself, and view those months in the sarai as a temporary setback to his progress. His conduct towards them amounted to a betrayal of his benefactors, a foretaste of his subsequent betrayals, though on a small scale, the worst being his betrayal of the Brigadier. His moral hollowness and obtuseness could be partly due to the dehumanising effect of the corrupt urban environment he had got into.

From the time Ratan got employed the process of his isolation and estrangement from his fellowmen began. He also became more and more self-centred and selfish. Initiated into the mysteries of his job by his boss the superintendent, he could feel quite at home in the new environment as well as win in no time the approval and favour of his boss. In retrospect Ratan could realise that his instinct for survival, his docility, servility, his
sycophancy and his eagerness to please his superiors, were responsible for his quick success. These came to him with the same naturalness and effortlessness as "rebellion" came to his father. Of course he was also hardworking and efficient, which many other clerks in the office were not. As reward for his competence and usefulness, he was confirmed in service and given many "unique" assignments to the envy of his colleagues. They called him names but he was indifferent. For he had come to Delhi only for a career.

Once secure in his job, Ratan could forget altogether those days of desperate struggle to find a job when even mere survival seemed impossible. The pursuit of a career gripped his mind. Its ominous power over him was proved on the day he let down two of his senior colleagues who along with him had been overburdened with work without any compensation for it. Ratan was at first indignant at the injustice of it. But he was easily baited and won over. The prospect of a possible promotion and a bright career held before him by his bosses did the trick. And he decided to let down the two clerks. Ratan tells his listener cryptically, "the die was cast" and he was launched "upon the solemn and relentless pursuit of a career". What means he adopted did not matter. His apprenticeship to a career and to a life of duplicity and material gain began to pick up pace.

What makes Ratan's character three dimensional and interesting is that he was not without doubts and misgivings about his unscrupulous pursuit of a career. His wakeful conscience raised from time to time inconvenient questions about what he was doing and the means he adopted. Its voice was feeble but could not be silenced or muffled. Without an alert conscience he could not have felt any sense of guilt which became for him in course of time an intolerable burden, the "Albatross" hanging around his neck. Later his fully
awakened conscience would not leave him in peace until he sought ways of redeeming himself. He still remembered men of exemplary self-abnegating pursuits whom he had known, those “who had pursued truth”, “others who had devoted a life-time to art or public service”, those who like his own father “had suffered endless privation, even death, for a thing called freedom”, and “those who, in the face of the world’s indifference, had chosen to expend their lives in the pursuit of goodness”.31 There were also moments when he “saw nothing but filth” around him and had violent and rebellious thoughts. But he soon calmed down to ask himself whether there was anything he could do, or could he do anything at all? How could he ever get away from the surrounding filth? There were certainly honest doubts and not easily answered. But lacking the will-power and sense of purpose of his father and those like him, he easily succumbed to the pressure of circumstances, and silenced, perhaps a little too soon, the turbulence in him. As an anticlimax to his honest doubts, now his worldly-wise thoughts were: “What was to be done? One had to live. And to live, one had to make a living. And how was a living made except through careers”?32

Now that Ratan had made career the goal of his life, the process of his isolation and estrangement from his fellowmen which had begun when he unceremoniously turned his back upon his sarai friends, gained momentum from the time he let down his colleagues in the office. An immediate change in him was a hardening of his sensibilities and indifference to the resentment of his colleagues. It was clear to him that he could not take any chances regarding his career. And he got the rewards for his obedience to his bosses, and was promoted to a higher position. He learnt that “it was the skill in manoeuvre that mattered”. “The right or wrong of the side one took was not in question, nor were there touchstones by which one chose. No morals were involved”.33 Ends justified means.
Ratan began to taste power which fed his ego. A brief note by him nearly drove a contractor bankrupt and rendered helpless his friends among the higher-ups. When he turned down a bribe of ten thousand rupees offered to change his noting, he “felt both righteous and proud”, though the bribe offered could have met many of his needs. His refusal was not motivated by any sense of doing what was morally right and just. It was actually an act of egotistical pride and vanity disguised as an act of impartial justice.

It must be however said to Ratan’s credit that he also felt somewhat sad and disturbed. He was shocked by the contradiction that the same world which once drove him from pillar to post only to refuse him a petty job, now was absurdly on its knees to bribe him to make him change his note which, as all knew, was true to facts. The world seemed to be “a place without law, a planet turning in the darkness, going heaven knew where”. The superintendent’s enigmatic explanation for the moral confusion around only added to Ratan’s perplexity. He said: “You know, Ratan, --- nothing but God exists. You can be certain only of Him”. “He meant --- that there was no point in looking for truths aside from the truth of God. Money in the world always changed hands. God was only concerned with what one did with the money. Did a man --- use it for good purposes”. But Ratan, who had not as yet forgotten his father for whom the nobility of means was as important as the noble ends sought, could not be satisfied with the superintendent’s explanation. His question had not been answered:

Did he mean that it was the way you used the money that God was watching and not how you got it? Was graft, in His eyes, the same as any other money? And what about the consequences, consequences for what
was termed as the 'character' of the giver and the taker? Or, was 'character' just a myth --- ? And did the Superintendent at all consider the consequences of a wrong noting for other people, strangers, people that you did not even know existed.36

Implicit in all these questions genuinely troubling Ratan’s mind is the question of one’s responsibility to one’s fellowmen and one’s society, since one did not live in isolation but in the midst of people, and whatever one did invariably affected others too, as Ratan’s father used to remind him. Ratan was to find answers to some of these questions by the hard way in course of time. For the present the oracular utterance of the superintendent left a wide berth for one to interpret as it suited one’s convenience.

The mature Ratan, grown wise and humble after prolonged and scrupulous self-analysis of his own motives and actions, realise how he himself succumbed to the widespread amoral, utilitarian and commercial attitude to religion and God, acknowledging His existence, visiting temples regularly, donating sums of money to religious institutions, as compensation for what one had done, and pursuing with a free conscience, with vigor one’s selfish materialistic pursuits without a thought of what harm he did to others directly and indirectly. It was tacitly assumed that God “sees all, but does not necessarily at the same time judge. His judgement --- comes only in spurts, if it comes at all, and can be influenced with a lump sum. All you need is the wherewithal and a broker”.37

What Ratan says amounts to a severe indictment of Indian society since independence, in which even religion is turned into a transaction, a bargain, while such values as honesty, integrity, service and the like are forgotten. But young Ratan intent on
his career and easily susceptible to influences, compromised like most people and accepted the superintendent’s explanation of God’s ways. The gains of the compromise he had made were soon to manifest. The superintendent tricked him into marrying his niece and saw to it that he was made an officer sometime after as the reward for it. If the insinuation made by his colleagues about his degrading marriage hurt him, he could ignore them. He had become “a man of ambition. Not the vaporous ambition of his adolescence --- but the cold, calculated ambition of a hardened man”\(^{38}\) (emphasis added).

Ratan’s narration now reaches a difficult phase. He cannot articulate with ease and coherence as a number of issues personal and public get tangled up. This phase is concerned with the India-China war. Ratan is prompted to dwell on it by the listener who wants to know about Ratan’s conduct during the war. Ratan characterises it as “Nothing but exemplary”\(^{39}\). The explosive irony of this assertion becomes clear when he elaborates on it. The very tone of his narration brings out his self-mockery and irony. In retrospect he realises the sheer dishonesty, hypocrisy and deception of his conduct, his heroic gestures, the loud-mouthed platitudes and patriotic speeches, outbursts of indignation, demonstration of love for his fellow citizens, donation of blood, and contribution to the war fund. They were all instances of his histrionics and a mask to cover up his perfidy which he reveals later. He also fabricated an article titled ‘Crisis of Character’ purporting to trace the root cause for India’s downfall to the failure of “Indian Character”.\(^{40}\) This article is a travesty of composition, full of cliches and grandiloquence, a hotch-potch of pieces gathered from second hand and third hand sources.\(^{41}\)
After referring to the declamatory and rhetorical flourishes of his article – a comic document written with an amazing cocksureness – Ratan knocks out a bolt by his startling revelation to his listener: “You see, to cut a long story short, just before the war started I took a bribe. An enormous bribe --- No more, no less”.42 In this abrupt revelation of Ratan’s there is a touch of drama, but it is justifiable because he is not playacting but trying to impress upon his auditor a bitter truth about himself as forcibly as possible. This revelation would have been ‘anticlimactic’ had it been about something trivial.43 But there is something more in Ratan’s document than his hypocrisy and self-deception. While the account of India’s glorious past is all garbled, his onslaught on the corruption of the times, though verbose, has a hard core of truth in it in the sense that Ratan knows about it firsthand as an insider. Therefore the document is as much directed against him as against the corrupt society of which he is a product, though he might not have been aware of it at the time of writing it. Or, it could be a camouflage to cover up his own moral lapses. As Tapan Kumar Ghosh observes, his failure “to face his moral crisis in his life is symptomatic of a whole generation to accept moral responsibility”.44

Ratan did not know why he took the bribe, because he had no need for it. He was no stranger to unscrupulous, unethical and fraudulent conduct towards others for personal gain. But his taking the huge bribe, though an extraordinary act, did not mark “the lowest point of downward movement” as Tapan Ghosh believes.45 For the worst of his acts, the betrayal of the Brigadier, was yet to be. All his frantic and exaggerated patriotic exercises were obviously attempts to stifle his guilty conscience. And hence he feels “somewhat lighter” after he reveals his guilty act to his listener. As this young man would like to know in better detail what could have motivated Ratan take the unwanted bribe, he probes his own mind
and heart, despite the hurt it causes, for an answer to the question which cannot be evaded. Having taken the bribe, he could not be at peace with himself. He himself was puzzled by what he did. His conscience, awake though not always energetically active, kept on pricking him, continued to caution him and raise uneasy questions from time to time. To it he owed his accumulating sense of guilt which became keen and unbearable. Ratan had to ask himself what had happened to him between his earlier and blunt refusal of a bribe by the contractor, when he had need of the money, and his later acceptance of it when he had none at all.

In an effort to find an answer to those questions Ratan looks back at his own career between the days of Independence and the India-China war. He notes that many undesirable changes had taken place in himself and in the social, political and moral environment of the country, and become gigantic. As the private and public worlds were inextricably connected, what happened in the one also happened in the other. As Ratan puts it: "The wide world and me. Me and the wide world. But how can one separate the two. The wide world took in me in its wake, overwhelmed me, smothered me ---". Though a pigmy, he tried to resist but in vain the changes in him and felt the agony and confusion of a dilemma.

The novelist uses the occasion of Ratan’s retrospective account to present artistically a sharp but restrained analysis of the moral degradation of the post-independence generation. Keeping the focus unswervingly on Ratan, who is anxious to know what went wrong with him rather than with the society at large, Joshi makes Ratan’s personal failure a reflection of the failure of an entire generation to accept moral responsibility and live up to
the ideals and values of the pre-independence generations. Ratan as confessional narrator describes without exaggeration and with restraint what he saw, heard and did, his puzzlement and confusion at the chaos that enveloped him and his society, where corruption had become almost institutionalised.

Ratan begins his scrutiny of his times with an account of the elation, hopes and expectations that the advent of freedom generated in all people. He and others like him worked enthusiastically and sincerely night and day. He, though a minor official, did his best to make himself “useful”: “There were days of hard work and nights full of sleep” (emphasis added). This simple detail is very significant because he had as yet nothing on his conscience, no guilty act as such, to make him sleepless. He felt that he lived in a just and orderly world, and for once seemed to have forgotten thoughts of his career. But such days of hope did not last long. Men and things began to change rather suddenly, fast, and for the worse. Ratan who still remembered the days of the freedom struggle and the sacrifices made then, could not believe that cherished values were being flouted with impunity to do things which threatened the hard-won freedom. The new masters, politicians, officials, the old and new rich, seemed to make a mockery of freedom. “It started to seem that freedom meant freedom from right and wrong, from restraint, from decency”. The distinction between right and wrong was blurred. If one knew what was right, he had doubts whether it was practicable. As a result, even the best of men for want of “the daring or the greed of the charlatans” buckled or at times turned charlatans themselves. “What counted was power or money”, and “those who had neither were worthless”, “worse than a beggar’s shoe”, in the words of Ratan’s mother.
Enveloping all this was a senseless "barrage of words", "a fog beyond the fog" in the form of "speeches, editorials, resolutions, handouts, posters, banners, memoranda --- manifestoes, --- draft five year plans, books ---". Ratan who wished to be his own master and still pursue his career, did not know how to be one in this environment. He felt "Choked, oppressed; rebellious but tied up totally in knots". His sense of oppression and failure was more than personal; it was "a more general failure, the failure of a continent, a race". There were no standards to guide. Anything went as long as it was backed by power. One of no consequence like him could survive in this environment only by being a weather vane. And that is what he did, which was easier than offering resistance. Nevertheless it did leave a bad taste in the mouth.

However Ratan's restlessness wore itself out yielding place to apathy and indifference which grew inside him "like a boil", like "leprosy". He was becoming a moral leper. Outwardly, he became indifferent to his office work. In his talk to others there, he was vague, indifferent and rude, and behaved pompously and snobbishly towards visitors especially if they were of the lower class. His ego became so bloated that either he blew his own trumpet or ran down some decent man. Yet he could be hardly at ease with himself. Strangely in the midst of all this disturbance, discontent and panic his unscrupulous pursuit of a career remained unchanged. In fact it became more vigorous, with flattery and cunning as his weapons. His consolation was that he was not alone and there were others too in this respect. To illustrate the general unscrupulousness in his office, he cites an example. He and his colleagues conspired together to humiliate a young officer who was decent and hardworking, and wanted others to be like him. Ratan masterminded the conspiracy against him. As a result he asked for a transfer. Surprisingly, after the officer went away, it struck
Ratan that "it was like the young man that (he) had always wanted to be". The difference between Ratan and others who were unscrupulous was that at least for a time he was genuinely disturbed and confused by questions regarding his own conduct:

What had I done, what had I done which I should not have done? What was right, what was wrong? What was the measure for doing things or not doing them? Where were the dividing lines between success and failure, loyalty and betrayal, love and hate?

He felt like an autumnal leaf blown about by the wind.

It is made quite clear in the fictional context that though Ratan's moral confusion and lack of a sense of direction partly accounted for his taking the bribe, it was not certainly a chance or accidental occurrence but the culmination of a series of compromises he had been making in his pursuit of a career. In his self-scrutiny, however, he found two more self-deceptive reasons for it to justify himself. One was the general complacency that there would be no war, and therefore no occasion for using the defective weapons and no possibility of any harm coming to him. Secondly, he was after all a "Nobody", an utter non-entity in the vast government machinery to influence the course of things. And if there "was to be defeat --- then it was bound to be so irrespective of what (he) did or did not do. How could (his) little act matter one way or another".

It should be particularly noted here that Ratan's sense of his own insignificance, his being a "nobody" in the scheme of things, resulted in his experiencing a sense of anonymity, loss of individuality, estrangement from his true self, and "terrible loneliness". Consciousness of his crime and the consequent sense of guilt inevitably led to it.
"Loneliness" especially was a most searing experience for him, which continuously dogging him without any relief or respite over the years. He felt "horribly alone" in his "anger" and in his "failure" "carrying them in secret, like a thief, close to (his) heart", without a friend or companion or kinsman to communicate with, to share the agony and give help to ease the burden weighing on him. His wife was of little help as she could never understand his inner tumult and his daughter lived in her own world of youthful dreams. He lived in the midst of people and yet had none to come to his rescue. With all possible means of communication closed to him, his soul turned dry and sterile.

After this phase of confession covering his moral confusion and decline and growing sense of guilt, it becomes hereafter even more trying for Ratan to narrate his story as it moves towards its crucial and most difficult phase. When he resumes his narration after an interval he begins with a reference to the fear that gripped him. But more than the fear of his bosses and his guilty deed, he feared the shame and the punitive consequences of it, which would affect his career. The only person he was left with to consult and seek guidance was Himmat Singh, better known as the Sheikh, who had given Ratan the bribe. That he had none but him for this purpose is an index of the extent of his isolation and estrangement from friends and society. The Sheikh's response to his fears was one of downright contempt directed against Ratan and the society. Whatever law there was, "was not written by God but by a silly society that would do anything for money".

The Sheikh, who figures prominently in Ratan's narration hereafter, played a material role in his life particularly, though paradoxically, in restoring sanity to him and rehabilitating him in society. He helped Ratan to see beyond the dubious arms deal and the graft, and become keenly aware of all the shameful and meaningless elements in his life, of
what a travesty he had made of his paternal inheritance and the extent to which he had degraded himself as man and social being. This experience of being unmasked and his ego punctured unceremoniously ultimately helped Ratan to rediscover his identity and seek his redemption as well as reintegration with society. The Sheikh serves as a mirror character, to Ratan so that he can see himself in his true colours and attain self-knowledge.

The Sheikh was an out of the ordinary person in intelligence, sensitiveness and perception but notoriously perverted. A man of the gutter by birth and upbringing, punished excessively as a boy for a petty theft, humiliated and made to suffer undeservedly, he became an uncompromising crook, a leader of the underworld, and alienated from society even from his childhood. He remained deliberately an outsider all his life. He became contemptuous of all people, despised society and all social duties and obligations, and had no regrets. He conducted operations, as he told Ratan, “neither for money nor power but in order only to destroy --- Everything from top to bottom”. But he knew what was good and right but chose deliberately their opposite, and made evil his good. He was utterly indifferent to the war with China and the loss of lives in it. He had no illusions about anything or anyone including himself. He saw no reason to pretend to any virtue. A no-nonsense man he never minced words and easily saw through the pretences, hypocrisies and hollownesses of people like Ratan. For all his cynicism and contempt for people and society, there was a peculiar honesty, condour, and integrity about him. He too was troubled by the same questions as Ratan about right and wrong and the governance of the world. But he was not confused and muddled as Ratan was. The Sheikh, thus, serves as excellent contrast to people like Ratan.
Until Ratan got involved with the Sheikh, his moral decline was only gradual, and his offences comparatively minor. But from then on it picked up pace and became steep. Striking the deal with the Sheikh was the starting point. "It led from one thing to another" and after sometime he hardly knew where he stood.⁵⁹ Among the changes for the worse in him was that he developed a sudden interest in women and behaved with rudeness and vulgarity towards them. Though the war was imminent he was preoccupied with pleasures and brand-new enjoyment. Even the memory of his great Rathor ancestors who lived, fought and died for honour could not restrain him from his shameful activities. But his conscience, which could not be silenced altogether, asked him inconvenient and hurting questions about them. It asked him what was he doing in Bombay, the city of commerce, bargains, and "bargains with truth" and life.⁶⁰ Hurt and confused he made bold to tell the Sheikh that he could not go through with the deal because "the stuff was not up to standard". But he silenced Ratan by his snubbing reply: "Let us not have any illusions --- we (are) rubbish just as those items (are) rubbish".⁶¹ He could see Ratan through and through and sense at once his vulnerability and susceptibility to corrupt ways however much he might protest against them. He told him that if he had not roped him in, someone else would have done easily.⁶²

Under such forthright exposure Ratan squirmed but yet felt strangely drawn to the Sheikh in whom he saw something of himself reflected. Something in the Sheikh’s voice reached him and made him talk about himself. A more compelling reason for Ratan to open up was that "probably for the first time someone had shown interest in (his) life".⁶³ Such was the isolation, anonymity and loneliness of his existence that had none to talk to. Ratan talked about his life, his father to this underworld man as though he was talking to an old
friend or older brother. He vaxed eloquent about his father and his ideals. Even before he could complete his long speech of cliches, the Sheikh stunned him into silence by his blunt remark that Ratan was “a fool or a hypocrite”, his father’s death had meant “nothing” to him or he did not mean whatever he had said. Though angered by the Sheikh’s remark, he could not deny the charge of hypocrisy. Months later in one of the moments of honest self-analysis, he had to admit to himself that his father’s death had meant only one thing at that time, “that it was stupid to get killed like that. Stupid and meaningless. It served no one”.\textsuperscript{64}

Ratan had become so much depraved that he continued to seek his sensual pleasures and greedy accumulation of money despite the shocks administered by the Sheikh and the disquieting questions raised by his conscience. But none of them could satisfy him or provide the escape he sought: “The more money I accumulated, the more I was dissatisfied, and the more I was determined to ‘enjoy’ life. And all the time I thought of death”. His obsession with death “mounted in direct proportion” to the money that he accumulated each day.\textsuperscript{65} It was the death of his soul and spirit, and of his essential self. Towards the close of his narrative to the listener Ratan makes a remark about death which may be adduced here: “To die, at best, is difficult. Death, in the knowledge of one’s shame, in the knowledge that one has made a hash of life’s purpose, is unbearable”.\textsuperscript{66} These words, of course, were spoken by the Ratan who had far advanced in self-knowledge.

It remains for Ratan to present to his listener the most dismal and depressing and also the most difficult part of his confession: the consequences of the shady deal and its wider implications to himself and to others, his Brigadier friend in particular. In fact the listener reminds him of the Brigadier and is keen on knowing what happened to him after
the war. Virtually he pins him down to narrating it. However, Ratan does not give him a
direct account of it, although all that he has narrated so far in a sense has led him to it. But
the primary objective of Ratan is to confess his self absorption and deceit, the hide and seek
he played with himself, his hypocrisy, his histrionics, his misdeeds, degradation and guilt
for all of which he has to atone. His betrayal of the Brigadier is a part of the story. In this
part of the narrative Ratan reveals the depths to which he had fallen and the slow and
fluctuating degrees by which he could recover ultimately, sanity and sense of purpose in
life.

Ratan now begins with an account of his visit to the Brigadier from his house and
later in the military hospital. Before leaving for his friend’s house he made it known to his
colleagues that he was going to visit a war veteran, only to boost his own self importance.
When he saw him, a broken man and a nervous wreck, presenting a most pathetic sight,
Ratan fell both sad and “gratified” at the same time because “he could be of help” to one
who was “more than a brother to him” when he went there the next day again, his “features
composed in an appropriate mould of concern and optimism”, carefully prepared like an
actor to play his part, he found that the Brigadier had already been removed to the hospital.
And this “entirely unexpected” development was: additional spice to the situation”.67 Ratan’s heart was “aflutter like a child’s who is on his way to the circus”. How much his
finer sensibilities had become blunted is illustrated by this episode.

Ratan makes several visits to the military hospital. Despite his histrionics and the
noisy scenes he created there all out of vanity, he had to see unimaginable scenes of
suffering, misery, pain and death. He saw the dead and injured being brought to the
hospital. He met many men, women and children, all kin to the wounded soldiers, some of
them fatally. These nameless multitudes were “so anonymous” that when Ratan looked at them, “they only reminded (him) of (himself).” At this heartrending sight surprisingly his basic humanity was roused and he felt a momentary identification with the common humanity which he had ignored or looked down upon in his snobbery. In his sympathy for them he had forgotten for a while his selfish pursuits. This was indeed a decisive step towards his ultimate redemption though he had still a long way to go for it. Ratan had another blood-curdling experience at the hospital which threw him off his balance. A soldier who had been bandaged all over but for a single arm gripped his leg and groaned for help. Ratan’s instantaneous reaction to this dying man’s appeal is very significant: “For a passing flash quite out of the blue it seemed as though it was my father not a soldier that held my leg, that it was my father dying over again” (emphasis added). Ratan’s remembering his father at that moment is unexpected. But what is most significant is that he should see a kind of spiritual unity between his dead father and the dying soldier, both of whom were martyrs to a cause.

An immediate result of Ratan’s visit to the hospital was that he began “to lose sleep”. The scenes he witnessed there, the smells and sounds, all haunted him for days to deprive him of his sleep. But his insomnia was also due to his becoming more compellingly aware of his own accumulating guilt. For the first time he began to sense that his unscrupulous actions had not only affected others but contributed to the fate of these unfortunate soldiers and their kin. The alert listener, who sees that Ratan in recalling his hospital experiences has got sidelined, reminds him once again of his question about the Brigadier. But Ratan hurries away in a huff inventing an excuse, without answering the other’s question. But the actual reason lies elsewhere. Joshi graphs precisely and
concretely the muddle and the sea-saw in the mind of Ratan in this final phase of the narrative. His sure insight is seen here into the difficulties and complexities of the confessing guilty mind, even though it is keen on revealing everything. To tell what actually happened to the Brigadier Ratan will have to explain how his betrayal was virtually responsible for it. That would mean his reliving in imagination the entire history of their relationship from the days of their youth, mutual trust and friendship to his betrayal at the most crucial moment of his friend's life. He will have to confront squarely the bitter truth about himself, and accept its disgrace, shame and humiliation unflinchingly, and be ready to be judged by others. To go through with this shattering experience, Ratan requires all the moral courage he can muster, will and determination. Therefore when the actual moment for the confession arrives, he shrinks away from it, and leaves the place inventing a lame excuse.

Having come away abruptly Ratan cannot be at peace. Now is the real test of the honesty of his intention to confess all. His conscience urges him against procrastination any further. Though it is late in the night Ratan on his own goes to his young friend’s doorstep to complete his story. His confession lasts all though the night in darkness as though in darkness he can confront himself confidently and frankly. He sees light in darkness, paradoxically. With an effort he had to restrain himself from digressing and come to the point directly, when he resumes his narration. With the war ending, after a discrete interval all people including Ratan, returned to their pleasures and diversions. His conscience was kept under control. On the New Year's Day, feeling very virtuous, he visited the Brigadier to give him his greetings. Though he had not given a thought to him for many days, he now considered it his “duty” to visit him and his family and felt greatly satisfied with himself.
because he was “capable of such great consideration for those poor people”. But he was horrified to find the Brigadier on the “brink of madness”, and felt “a sense of doom” as he watched him. In this rare honest moment Ratan felt for the second time in his life the first being when long ago his father was shot and he (Ratan) had felt that bullet in his chest, as though it was not his friend but himself who was rocking through some dark dungeon of the world.

On the spur of the moment Ratan prayed which he had almost forgotten how to do for years. His momentary identification with his agonised friend had inspired that prayer. But his prayer, as he explains to his auditor, was addressed not to God or anyone else, but to some part of himself which he had not spoken to in a long time. His prayer was: “I shall be good, I shall not be greedy. I shall not be afraid. And --- I shall have nothing more to do with Himmat Singh or the like of him”. Sincere though his prayer was, it was a conditional prayer, a “bargain”. While it implied that he had something to do with his friend’s fate, it could mean that if the Brigadier was not cured, he would not be obliged to keep the promises he made.

As if to test the strength of his bargaining resolve, Ratan was sent for by the Superintendent of Police for interrogation the very next day. Though scared he put on an expression of hurt feeling and outraged innocence, which was not new to him. At that very moment the prayer he had solemnly made earlier faded out. During the questioning he could easily affect surprise and righteous indignation, loudly proclaiming his sincere concern for the nation, and his abhorrence of all that was dishonest and crooked. The police officers were not taken in by these tricks and threw him into the lock-up. It all seemed
These ingenious arguments were certainly comfortable to Ratan, but he could not think of even one among his friends, relations and neighbours who get him released: "--- it dawned on me that in this great metropolis where I had spent twenty years of my life, where I knew dozens of men by their first names, there was none who I trusted enough to confide in. None who could help me. I was, I now knew, alone" (emphasis added). His self-centredness, unscrupulous ways, and guilt consequent upon criminal acts inevitably made him lonely, isolated and estranged. Ironically going against his own resolve, he had to seek the Sheikh’s help to get released from the lock-up. But that was not the end of his problems. A far graver issue remained. The S.P. rattled him by the revelation that the Brigadier for whom Ratan had mouthed a lot of concern was likely to be court-martialed any day for deserting the army during the war, not because of cowardice but because the equipment given to him was defective. The officer made it clear to Ratan that unless he admitted that he had cleared the equipment knowing that it was defective, “there was no
hope for the Brigadier, no hope at all. He gave him a day's time to record his confession.

On his way from the jail Ratan's thoughts once again ran on the familiar lines of exultation, complacency, self-satisfaction and hypocrisy betraying how incorrigibly ego-centric he always was and thought of his own importance rather than the friend who life was hanging by the slenderest thread. Here was for him "a chance in a million" "to show the world what a selfless and courageous man (he) was" who by confessing would save the Brigadier. He saw himself as a martyr-to-be, who would be placed on a pedestal high above the plane of common men. Interestingly his thoughts on this occasion were very similar to those he had years ago when he was on his way to join Subhas Bose's army. As on that occasion, his present mood of exaltation too ended very soon. Faced with the need to make a moral choice Ratan invariably vacillated. On both occasions his inner deficiency was revealed, for more grievously on the later occasion.

This mood of sacrificial exultation and upliftment in Ratan did not last beyond midnight. Fear of the consequences of his confession gripped him. What would happen to his career, his reputation, became his worry, and he began to panic. There was none he could speak to and confide in or seek consolation from. The still small voice of his conscience prevailing for a while, he decided to write out his confession and give it to the S.P. With the morning his panic was back again. In his helplessness he tried to seek the guidance of the temple pujari, "an agent of God", to "provide" him "the courage to do" what he knew he "must do". But ironically, even before he could speak to him, the pujari himself sought his help to extricate his contractor son from a nasty corner and offered to
gratify him suitably. Without a word Ratan turned away from him. During the next day, his resolve to write out his confession still holding he drafted and redrafted so many times that when it was finalised it effectively ceased to serve the purpose. As an anticlimax to all the tension and muddle he went through he did not deliver the letter at all either personally or through the post. This is one more instance of Ratan’s evading a moral choice and decisive action. This is not surprising judging by his previous conduct. But what is most scandalising and revolting was his blaming the Brigadier for his present bother: “I had the nagging feeling that I was being imposed upon – by the army, the S.P., but most of all, by the Brigadier himself. Was it not to save him that I was undergoing so much bother? Why could he not have fought like the rest of them? What a situation he had created for everyone by his desertion? In short, I felt I was doing him a favour!”  

His attention once again redirected from pre-occupation with himself to the Brigadier by the alert listener, Ratan comes up with the announcement which comes as a bolt from the blue: “Well, two weeks later he killed himself, shot himself in the head”. This is in its abruptness and stunning effect similar to the Mariner’s statement, “I killed the Albatross”. As Ratan speaks his words his voice goes dry and his tongue becomes parched partly because of the great effort required to utter them but largely because of his sense of guilt. What he says amounts to “I killed the Brigadier”, because what he did was as good as that.

When Ratan came to know about the Brigadier’s death from the newspapers he felt a “chill”, a “stupor”. But yet years of play-acting had died so hard in him that when he called on the widow he “went through the motions of condolence perfectly”. But when the charm he had given to Brigadier at the time of his going to the war was returned to him as
wished by the dead man, it was clear to Ratan that his friend knew who had betrayed him. Breaking his habit of simulation for the first time in many years, he went to visit the Brigadier in the morgue. He had to admit to himself, though belatedly, that "something had gone seriously wrong with (his) life". It was a traumatic experience for him to look at the remains of the Brigadier who had blown his brains out. Its impact on him was immediate and overpowering. The shattered skull looked like a vast pit and he felt that his own life like a worm crawled at its bottom. This vision haunted him for days. Shaken out of his complacency, false sense of security, and illusions, and shocked out of his moral lethargy, Ratan realised that he had to accept responsibility for all his actions, and the wrongs he had committed and perpetrated. Sooner or later he would be pulled up by God to account for his conduct. He feared that he might go mad. If he did, he had to face it alone with none to share it. He also realised that there was little that anyone could do to help him. Time and again he was reminded of his absolute loneliness and isolation: "The silence remained. The panic remained. And I remained alone --- no occurrence, no conversation, no visit of either friend or foe, no sleep, in spite of the sleeping pills --- no relief, no respite from the hands that pulled me steadily down ---".

This prolonged experience of unrelieved torment, the anguish of being robbed of all familiar ties, and of having to face spiritual emptiness caused by guilt experienced by Ratan resembles strongly the Mariner's experience of a similar plight. It also reminds one a like experience gone through by Macbeth in Shakespeare's great play Macbeth. In his desperation he impulsively set out to take revenge on the Sheikh who had dragged him into the mire of disgrace. He thought that it was necessary to redeem his and the Brigadier's "honour". But the Sheikh was utterly indifferent to his threat. He revealed to Ratan that he
had been betrayed by none other than the Secretary himself who had tipped off the police to save his own skin. What was more the idea of clearing the defective equipment originated with the Minister and Secretary who used Ratan as a pawn. To the bewildered and indignant Ratan the Sheikh explained contemptuously that he was a sham and spineless flunkey: “you are bogus --- from top to bottom. Your work, your religion, your friendships, your honour, nothing but a pile of dung. Nothing --- but poses, a bundle of shams”. Apart from this blunt and outspoken reprimand, which seared Ratan’s ego, the Sheikh asked him whether he would have confessed to the S.P., or would he confess given another chance. Ratan had no answer to give.

The stupefying disclosure of certain least suspected facts by the Sheikh set Ratan revolve in his mind the life he had led since he came to Delhi two decades ago. He had to accept that the Sheikh’s assessment of his character was absolutely correct. He had lived only in smog, confused, exploited and exploiting, deceiving and finally deceived. Apart from being a “trickster”, he had learnt nothing. More fundamentally, did he ever know the meaning of honour and friendship? Would he ever know it again? Would his honour be really restored if he killed the Sheikh? Ratan had no answer to any of these questions. He only felt “lonely, thoroughly muddled and depressed”. He had never thought on these lines. He was appalled by the yawning chasm between what he had wished to be and what he had actually become. In the agony of his despair over a wasted life, he cried out to the spirit of his dead father: “Father, Father, what have I done”?

To demonstrate what a pusilanimous creature Ratan was, the Sheikh suggested that he should make the Secretary who had let him down, the real target of his revenge. On their
way to the Secretary. Ratan, whose conscience was fully roused by now, set himself examining and analysing himself with “detachment” and a rare calm of mind. It was clearly borne in upon him that something fundamentally was wrong with him, and that his life had been “a great, great waste”. Another equally forceful conclusion he arrived at was that unlike his father whom everyone knew to be “a very good man”, he “was not a good man”, and that “it was going to take a long time becoming a good man” if he ever did. Nevertheless something had to be done to set things right, although he did not know he could. It was equally necessary to know why he was not a good man, and what precisely was wrong with him. Seeking answers to these questions was to become before long his sole preoccupation.

The salutary effect of this introspection on Ratan was soon evident. When he sat face to face with the Secretary, significantly he thought of his father rather than revenge. He recalled his father’s voice and what he had said on the day after he returned from Gandhi’s prayer. He also remembered the day he was killed. Ratan recalled very vividly “how he had sat, his arms folded above his head, while they battered him with clubs and how he had got up and taken those steps towards the sergeant”, presenting the very image of self-sacrifice. Ratan now asked himself the most pertinent question, what would his father have done had he been in his shoes. The unambiguous answer was that he would not have killed the Secretary because that was no solution for the problem he faced. Revenge was “too much of a simplification, too primitive a solution”. It would not redeem his honour. Therefore he “had to work some other way”, and the “villain” he had been looking for to avenge “had to be found elsewhere”. And Ratan’s introspection brought him the grim the truth that the villain, the “culprit” he was looking for was none other than himself. Because
having known both good and evil and the difference between the two, he had chosen evil and thus he had betrayed his own spirit. In other words Ratan had come to accept the responsibility for all that he did, good and bad alike, rather than blame it on others. Such acceptance alone could make his redemption and renewal possible. By it alone he could hope to resolve the crisis of his character.

That evening, as Ratan and the Sheikh drove away from the Secretary, turned out to be the most momentous in Ratan's life. The Sheikh sensed that some change was taking place in Ratan who had sworn revenge earlier. As though to help him further in this process of inner transformation, and also give him a glimpse of the seamy side of life, he took him to the shack in a slum area where his mother had once lived. The Sheikh too, like Ratan, was in a confessional mood, and probably was looking for a suitable listener. Having chosen to be an outsider to society, the Sheikh too was a lonely man and perhaps had felt the need to communicate with someone he could speak to frankly about the ups and downs of his life. One may catch the ring of urgency in his voice in his present conversation with Ratan and an eagerness to make an impression upon him so that he may take a warning.

Born in filth and growing up in it the Sheikh was determined to avenge the indignities and insults heaped upon him and his people and the wrongs done to them by their society. He knew that the life he lived was evil and was not at all proud of it. But unlike Ratan, "he had not sold himself --- nor --- had he betrayed a friend". He also knew that the sinister life he had chosen to live had turned his heart into a "desert". What sustained him and gave a direction to his life was his "hatred" of all those who were responsible for the disgrace of his family. His mother was totally opposed to such a life and
warned him that “the darkness of God” had possessed him. But he had brushed it aside. It was a little too late when he realised that the life he had chosen to live led him nowhere. His anguished questions were: Who would “cure” the darkness of God? Who would cure the crooked world? If God alone could do it, where was He? “What was God? and Where”? Surprisingly such questions about God had crossed Ratan’s mind occasionally. But he had never raised them with the urgency that the Sheikh had felt when he raised them. The Sheikh had realised that he was beyond redemption because his soul had been killed. But he felt a genuine concern for Ratan and believed that he still had a chance to retrieve soul from the quagmire it had got into, because it had only been poisoned but not yet destroyed like his. This very salutary advice to Ratan was: “--- souls are like muscles --- May be to develop them one has first to put them to use”.93

The Sheikh’s words carried tremendous force of conviction as they sprang from his clear awareness of himself as a soul lost forever as well as his earnest wish that a similar fate should not befall Ratan. Therefore however disconcerting and hurting they might have been they did go home to Ratan. The Sheikh’s parting plea to him was: “Think of your father. Think of the things he said --- think of the moment they shot him down --- Try to put yourself to use --- It might be too late. You have been too long a slave --- But give it a try. One lost nothing”.94 These words were not lost on Ratan, who had now become receptive to well-meant advice, though it came from the least expected person. The Sheikh became his most effective mentor. In the narrative scheme this underground man is intended to serve as both comparison and contrast to Ratan.
The Sheikh teaches Ratan to be responsible to himself and to society. It is now crystal clear to him that the responsibility for the betrayal of his soul lay only in himself whatever inducements for it might have been in society or elsewhere. This awareness and the sense of shame accompanying spurred him on to seek and find an activity to start with which would make his life useful. He also realised that life had a "purpose" though he was not able to spell it out. At one time he had agreed with the view of a colleague of his that life was "zero" and nothing could be taken away from it. Now he had began to realize that whether life was positive or "negative" depend upon what one did with it. This wholesome and mature attitude to life and how one lived it Ratan could develop partly due to the influence of the Sheikh and largely due to the living example of his own father whose greatness as well as significance he could understand better now in the light of his experience.

Now, there were the questions of widespread corruption in society, "the crookedness of the world" and "the crookedness of oneself". Would God or Revolution or both enable one to meet their challenge and find a solution for them? Ratan felt that they were much too large questions for one of his abilities to deal with. Instead of puzzling himself over them, he thought that it was better to begin with oneself and do in all humility whatever he could do within his limits in a spirit of selflessness to be of "use" leaving it to others who are better equipped to play the role of revolutionaries and world betterers. Now Ratan could understand the profound meaning of the words of the Panditji whom everyone made fun of. When they asked him what was the point of the "mumbo-jumbo" of "the shouting of mantras", was it not "a waste of time", and had it "ever changed the fortunes of men", this simple and utterly unassuming man with little metaphysics in him, had an answer, simple and profound at the same time.
I am here to be of use. And one thing I can do, the only thing that I have been taught to do, is to shout this mumbo-jumbo. And so that is what I do. Not only for myself. For everyone. Foolishly, blindly. But what reason is there--- to suppose that the making of money or of a chair, or the pursuit of women is any the less foolish, or less blind? 97

It occurred to Ratan that his father too would have said the same thing, though perhaps indifferent words.

Ratan also remembered yet another of his father’s convictions, which had profound personal and social implications. In fact, his father had been taught it by his father; “whatever you do touches someone, somewhere”. It meant that one did not live in isolation and therefore one had to be constantly aware of others and of one’s responsibility to them and to the community. No human act was performed in isolation and without consequence. Therefore one had to be always mindful of this fact in whatever he did, and do nothing that might cause harm or hurt to others. If the Sheikh drove home to Ratan to learn to be useful, the old Panditji and his own father, by their example, enabled him to understand the meaning of what it was “to be of use”.

Having wastefully spent two decades of his life in debasing activities, it was not easy for Ratan to turn to a life of usefulness at once. The first thing to be done was to cleanse himself inwardly, purify his soul of its accretions, and retrieve it from being lost altogether, before he could be of “use”. It was an arduous exercise and awesome process. Yet it had to be tried. Luckily, he hit upon the rather unusual exercise – unusual for anyone let alone an officer – of wiping the shoes of all those who visited the Krishna temple every
morning for worship. It became a daily ritual for him, performed solemnly and sincerely, to sit on the doorsteps of the temple and dust the shoes. If the Sheikh had begun his life as a shoe-shining boy to make a living, Ratan was prompted to it as a means of atonement, to right living, and to discover himself. This extreme step of Ratan’s could easily be taken for one of his theatrical gestures for which he was well-known. But he was in earnest and had learnt to be indifferent what others might think of it.

Ratan explains to his young friend what he does after he has performed this ritualistic exercise everyday:

I stand at the doorstep and I fold my hands, my hands smelling of the leather and I say things. Be good, I tell myself. Be good. Be decent. Be of use. Then I beg forgiveness. Of a large host: my father, my mother, the Brigadier, the unknown dead of the war, of those whom I have harmed with deliberation and with cunning, of all those who have been the victims of my cleverness, those whom I could have helped and did not.99

He carried this mood of humility even to his office. And whenever he found himself “getting to be clever, lazy, vain, indifferent”, he would raise his hands to his face and smell “the smell of a hundred feet that must at the moment be toiling somewhere”,100 it would put him in his place. The difference between this prayer and the other bargaining prayer he had made when he found the Brigadier gravely ill, can easy be noticed. It also indicates how much he has been inwardly transformed.

The shoe-shining exercise had a number of virtues for Ratan. It was first of all a “confessional unto himself”, as Thakur Guru Prasad101 aptly puts it. It was entirely his
choice and voluntary, not prescribed by anyone, just as his decision to confess his story of
guilt was also voluntary. Therefore he was answerable only to his conscience, a most
exacting judge. It was an exercise in humility, and an endeavour to conquer his earlier
habituated sense of superiority, snobbery, pride, conceit, arrogance, and separateness from
others. He must have thought that having descended to the lowest depths of disgrace, he
should try to ascent by rendering sincerely a menial and useful service which would place
him symbolically on the lowest rung of society along with the humble, the lowliest and the
lost. It would help him to identify himself with all in society, involve himself in a humble
measure in the lives of people, and thus rehabilitate himself socially, morally, and
spiritually. As an act of penitence it would help him to recover his lost self and regain his
integrity. It would indicate his giving up for good his selfish pursuits, and symbolise his
psychic purification and moral rebirth and revitalisation. It would constantly remind him of
the course his life had run through, and of his duties and obligations to others in the
community. Moreover, it touched many but harmed none. It expressed his solidarity with
the community and his total integration of his self with society, freeing him from the sense
of loneliness, isolation and estrangement which had held him prisoner for long. It held out a
promise of fulfillment in his life which had gone dry and sterile.

Ratan tells his listener that he did not enter the temple, but stopped at the doorstep
while others prayed. He does not explain why. Probably he had grown averse to the
commercialisation of temple worship. But a more probable reason could be surmised. He
might have felt that he was not yet qualified to enter a temple. But he carried on shoe-
shining as an act of piety in the spirit of a religious exercise. Effectively it was a religious
exercise. In some religious traditions of India, taking the dust off the feet of devotees
and touching one's forehead with it is a familiar and sacred exercise. The name of one of the Alvars in the Sri Vaishnava tradition of South India is 'Tondaradippadi Alvar', which means 'the dust of the feet of devotees'. Touching the feet of elders and prostrating before them as a mark of respect are traditional practices continued even today. It is an established tradition among the Sikhs to dust the footwear of devotees, as Ratan does, as an expiating exercise (Prāyaschitta).

Ratan did not trouble himself where this exercise would lead him ultimately or what its final outcome would be. He did not expect anything miraculous to happen or look for quick results. That is implicit in his regarding this phase of his life as an apprenticeship. He did not look beyond the present. It was enough for him if he did what he had taken up as best he could "without vanity and expectations and also without cleverness". In essence it was niskamakarma although Ratan does not invoke that term. This was the apprenticeship of his conception. What he had embarked upon might be just the beginning to a life of usefulness. Every morning he came "to learn to wipe shoes well", and it might help him to learn other things of use. He knew that it was "rather late in the day". "But one must try and not lose heart, not yield at any cost to despair". His faith in life and in himself had been restored. The apprenticeship he had taken up provided an anchor to his life, an answer to his dilemmas about living in a society which was without aims, purposes and principles, and it also freed him from his burden of guilt. It enabled him to attain a serenity of mind he had not known for years.

When Ratan made the acquaintance of his prospective listener and began his first prefatory monologue it was the evening of a Sunday. By the time he brings to a close, the
final and the most important phase of his confession begun the previous night, it is
daybreak. It is a "cold dawn", but "a dawn" nevertheless as Ratan observes. It holds the
promise of better days for the nation as long as there are young men like the young listener,
willing to learn from the failures of their elders and are ready to sacrifice, "to pay the
price". The timing of both the beginning and closing of his confession is meaningful.
For him confession has of course been therapeutic. But he has made other significant gains
too. He has now a better awareness and understanding of himself. Articulation and frank
communication, which had been denied him for long, with an alert and intelligent listener,
sympathetic and sceptical at the same time, have clarified to him what he was and what he
has become, what his values and priorities in life are or ought to be. In fact this important
change in him for the better may be seen in his changed manner of speech. It is simple,
direct, free from verbosity, cliches and platitudes and assertiveness all of which were
characteristic of his earlier manner. The labyrinthine course of his life reaches a new
mentally and morally invigorated and meaningful phase. He is now a humble enlightened
person mature, enriched and humanised by experience. The shoe-shining purificatory
exercise he adopts, it is important to note, is his solution (not the novelist's) entirely meant
for himself, not for others. In adopting it, he makes no more claims for himself as an
average man learning to do what he has undertaken as best he can free from thoughts of
selfish gains and rewards.

It is significant that Ratan does not even refer to all those others who are corrupt and
about whom he knows only too well. His focus is on himself, on how best he can make
reparations for his lapses. It may be asked why he is not punished for his enormous crime.
As there is no proof of his guilt, legally speaking, he cannot be punished. But what is most
important is that he is punished by his own conscience much more than any court of law ever can. Finally Ratan is able to transcend the limitations imposed on him by his egotistical obsession and pursuits, and acquire a sharpened awareness of himself, his place in society, and his responsibility to it. He recovers his moorings which he had lost for a time. He realises the imperative need for relatedness as an individual as well as a social being. He reaches the conviction that the only sustaining basis for action is that it should be of use to oneself and others. In dusting the shoes of the congregation at the temple everyday, he finds such an activity which reclaims his humanity and brings him back to the fold of his society from which he felt he had been isolated and estranged. Thus largely by his own effort he is restored to the community. It is like the prodigal returning home. Ratan also affirms quietly that however depressing and disquieting the present may be, given the will and readiness to learn, it is still possible to survive and make sense of one’s life. Thus at the end of The Apprentice Ratan Rathor, like Sindi Oberoi of The Foreigner emerges as a positively changed man, grown mature in outlook, and socially responsible.

The Last Labyrinth, to be studied in the next chapter, presents the self’s estrangement from society and its travails to reintegrate itself with it, from yet another perspective. Though chronologically the fourth of Joshi’s novels, it will be considered next because it too like The Foreigner and The Apprentice employs, of course with a difference, the strategy of first-person protagonist narrative, which deserves to be examined. The protagonists of the first four of Joshi’s novels are all, in different ways, questers in search of the meaning and purpose of life, and of a society, a world of meaningful relatedness. Quest becomes the central concern of their lives. In the process they experience loneliness, isolation and estrangement in different degrees and ways. While
after much struggle Sindi, Ratan, and Billy Biswas of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* transcend them to be united with the society of their choice, only Som Bhaskar of *The Last Labyrinth* does not. The other three are acutely aware of their context, even when they struggle against it or come into conflict with it. Their quests take place within the framework of their respective societies. They find meaning and purpose when they are integrated with them. Som Bhaskar, however, remains aloof from all social concerns and is preoccupied with questions other than his relation to his society.
Notes and References


5. The Apprentice, p. 141.


12. Ibid, p. 36.


14. The Fall, p. 84.


16. Ibid., p. 7.

17. Ibid., p. 6.
41. Strangely Joy Abraham sees in the hollow gestures of Ratan 'an element of foolish sincerity side by side with hypocrisy'. See "Vision and Technique in The Apprentice", The Fictional World of Arun Joshi, p. 211. She fails to perceive the obvious irony in the narrative.

42. The Apprentice, p. 58.

43. Tapan Kumar Ghosh regards as it 'anti-climatic' – See his Arun Joshi's Fiction, p. 102.

44. Ibid., p. 91.

45. Ibid., p. 103.

46. Ibid., p. 62.

47. Ibid., p. 54.

48. Ibid., pp. 61-62.

49. Ibid., p. 61.

50. Ibid., p. 63.

51. Ibid., p.

52. Ibid., p. 65.

53. Ibid., p. 68.

54. Ibid., p. 69.

55. Ibid., p. 70.

56. Ibid., p. 71.

57. Ibid., p. 72.

58. Ibid., p. 77.

59. Ibid., p. 73.

60. Ibid., p. 76.

61. Ibid., p. 77.
62. Ibid., p. 79.
63. Ibid., p.
64. Ibid., p. 80.
65. Ibid., p. 85.
66. Ibid., p. 142.
67. Ibid., p. 91.
68. Ibid., pp. 92-93.
69. Ibid., p. 94.
70. Ibid., p.
71. Ibid., p. 99.
72. Ibid., pp. 100-101.
73. Ibid., p. 104.
74. Ibid., p. 109.
75. Ibid., p. 110.
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