CHAPTER 3

THEME OF ALIENATION

Crisis in the soul of an individual, who is entangled in the maze of contemporary life with its confusion of values and normal anarchy, and his untiring quest for a remedy lie at the core of Arun Joshi's exploration of focus on the identical theme of crisis of existence and quest for survival. Sindi Oberoi's dilemma in 'The Foreigner' resulted from his evasion of life and its ineluctable problems. The Strange Case of Billy Biswas' dealt with Billy's estrangement from a hostile and uncongenial reality that stifled his sensibility with its material concerns, lack of mystery, and cultural uprootedness. Billy was a survivor of the deluge of materialism that overtook the form of a revolt against and a flight from the profligate society.

In "The Apprentice" Joshi presents an individual Sindi Oberoi who suffers the agony of the soul not due to his escapism or rebellion but due to his conformity to, and victimization by, a crooked and corrupt, society. Raskolnikov in 'Crime and Punishment' says, "Any man who has a conscience must pay the price if he is aware of his error. That is his punishment". Indictment of materialism has already occurred in the first two novels. But it is in the third novel that this indictment comes into prominence giving the book a wider social relevance.
Sindi Oberoi's dilemma is, in fact, socio-psychological. It can be illumined to a clear perspective if it is explained in terms of the concept of "ontological insecurity. R.D.Laing in his book "The Divided Self" explains that a human being is born as an entity with continuity in time and location in space". It also harbours a deep-rooted feeling of unreality. He constantly tries to "establish the missing continuity-dialogue between self and world to know that self is".1

The novel "The Apprentice" is about a dark crisis in the human soul. It depicts the anguished attempt of a guilt-stricken individual to retrieve his innocence and honour. It is a story of crime and punishment, of dislocation and search. It portrays the effort of 'a man without honour... without shame... a man of our times' (T.F. p.147) to impose meaning and order on his life which lacks them. At the same time the book contains a severe criticism of a rotten society with its meaningless pursuit of success and career, unscrupulous amassing of wealth in defiance of the sanctified values of its tradition like honesty, integrity of character, selfless service and honour.

Sindi is a saga of rootlessness, geographical as well as emotional, and of his search for an anchor in a parentless world. Born in Kenya, he lost both his parents in an air crash near Cairo when he was a mere child. This orphaned childhood generates in him a deep sense of emotional insecurity and colours his entire attitude to life. Denied of parental love, he has developed an indifference towards "those strangers whose only reality was a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs". He was brought up by his uncle in Nairobi who gave him "a feeling of having an anchor" in this lonely planet. But with his death that anchor, too, was lost.
The homelessness, which was till then personal, took on an acuteness and became cosmic with the death of his uncle. He was left alone in a friendless universe, remaining a perpetual foreigner in it and to all human relations. He looks upon himself as "an uprooted young man living in the latter half of the twentieth century who had become detached from everything except (himself)" (T.F. p.195). In a sense of dislocation, he feels himself to be a stranger in every place. As he himself puts it, "And yet all shores are alien when you do not belong anywhere". He is foreigner everywhere, in Nairobi in India (T.F. p.15) and even in America. Everybody, who comes in contact with him, the 'saddest man' she has ever known, says, "You are still a foreigner. You don't belong here". Mr. Khemka asks him in utter bewilderment: "Why are you so strange?" June also detects this strangeness in him in their first encounter: "There is something strange about you, you know. Something distant. I'd guess that when people are with you they don't feel like they're with a human being. May be it's an Indian characteristic, but I have a feeling you'd be a foreigner anywhere."

But Sindi's foreignness goes deeper than any caused by geography or nationality and culture. It is true that he is a derancinated person and has no country to represent ("And what country had I represented? Kenya or England or India?). But his alienation is not caused simply by the unhinging of geographic or cultural anchorage. It is rooted within his soul. As he himself puts it: "I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if I had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter! It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner. My foreignness lay within me and I couldn't leave myself behind wherever I went" (T.F. p.134).
His is a foreignness of the soul and thus mere change of geographic or atmospheric location cannot solve his problem. It must be resolved from within. He himself is aware of this when he says to June, "We are alone, both you and I. That is the problem. And our aloneness must be resolved from within". (my emphasis) This loneliness generates in Sindi a profound sadness. He is indifferent to the people and the events of life around him. Nothing seems to affect him. This indifference is produced by his sense of purposelessness of life, a life which is characterised by ephemerality and flux and which appears absurd to him. In a moment of intense self-revelation, Sindi gives vent to his feelings: "Lying there in the bed I wondered in what way, if any, did I belong to the world that roared beneath my apartment window. Somebody had be-gotten me without a purpose and so far I had lived without a purpose, unless you could call the search for peace a purpose (T.F. p.141).

The narration in "The Foreigner" keeps morning from the recent past in Boston to the present in Delhi. During the course of the novel he takes us to Nairobi where Sindi, the central character as well as the narrator of the story was born; to London where he studied; to a night club in Soho where he worked as a dishwasher and barman; to Scotland where the worked at a small library and discussed religion, God and mysticism with a catholic priest; to Boston where he studied for six years and met June and Babu and, to Delhi where he ultimately, settled not very good at remembering events". (T.F. p.32). We find Sindi acquitting himself well as a narrator.
Sindi's dilemma starts even at his birth. Hence the feeling of insecurity is very much inherent in him throughout his life. Born of an English mother and a Kenyan-Indian father, Sindi is a child of mixed parentage. Since both parents died early, he was orphaned. Rootless as he is, Sindi's life takes him to London, Boston and New Delhi.

Sindi Oberoi, a young man, in search of his roots and the meaning of life was totally a stranger everywhere. Sindi was a perfect foreigner. He was not only a foreigner to the two culture viz. American and Indian between which he shuttled but also to his soul. He was an orphan both in terms of relations and his emotional roots. He knows that he doesn't belong anywhere but his rootlessness is neither geographic, nor cultural. Not even atmospheric, generated by an unhinging of life and society.

Sindi Oberoi who posed so many questions to himself looked always strange. The whole life left him baffled. All along he had acted out of lust and greed and selfishness and people and applauded his wisdom. But he never expected death to hit someone he knew. The death of Babu Khemka had made him dejected.

A sense of dejection and remorse filled Sindi. It is impossible for him to ward off the negative feelings from this mind. He considered himself as a misfit who is detached, almost alienated a man who sees himself as a stranger wherever he lives or goes. In Kenya, where he is born in England and USA where he studied and in India where he finally settles down. His detachment transcends barriers of geography, nationality and culture. Whenever he saw his face in mirror he felt even more like an alien. He looked bitter and fed up.
"Fed up with many things. Fed up with the way we pretend to have forgotten the past and yet all the time we are looking for an opportunity to revive it. Fed up with puerile demonstrations of love. Fed up with my own self-importance". (T.F. p.25)

Sindi finds himself desolate as if he were in wilderness. Unlike pain, happiness can be shared with fellow beings. "It is aloneness in sufferings that makes men selfish (T.F. p.27). Sindi strongly believes that men all have their masks. He was very detached with life as well as love. Though Sindi was detached with an alien feeling, he was a dreamer. Even if he loved anybody or loved by anybody it would mean nothing. But when he was suffering from Asthma, June gently massaged his chest, he was surprised and felt things cracking up inside him. All his defences fell apart and he realised how foolish he was to possess detachment in life and love.

"Vain and foolish like a peacock . . . with unbearable wave of self-pity. Illness and physical pain had drained my will". (T.F. p.33).

The phenomenon of empty life having been pursued Sindi wanted to make a mark in his life. Sindi had lived without any purpose. This was because he was feeling alone, an alien in America or Kenya or India or any other place in the world. The foreignness lay within him and he felt that he lived only for dying.

The condition of Indian students in USA though looked promising was, in fact, very sordid. The Indian students in America feel very lost and some of them even commit suicide. That is why even Babu Khemka committed suicide. According to Sindi,
"Fear does make people superstitious" (T.F. p.44) Fear of loneliness and fear of insecurity make people superstitious. Babu's letter carried message of his death. He seemed incomplete, lost and alone. Babu was selfish. Only he was innocent enough to set his selfishness destroy him. Babu could not bear the humiliation. It was the self pity that had killed him.

Sindi said to Sheila, "Look at me. I have no roots. I have no system of morality what does it mean to me if you call me an immoral man. I have no reason to live". According to Khemka, Sindi was living but as good as dead, without any morality.

When Sindi was in the company of Mr. Khemka and Sheila he felt that he was becoming involved in the mess of life. Even Sheila expressed to Sindi, "I thought you had become too detached to get involved in this mess" (T.F. p.192). He understood the absurdity of life.

A strange feeling of aloneness and aloofness permeates the entire life of Sindi. He is always lonely, at ease in the world and detached in his life. He belongs to no country, no people and regards himself as 'an uprooted young man living aimlessly in the later half of the twentieth century'.

At the superficial level, Sindi finds his life enjoyable. But at the deeper level, his flight is far from description. The novel 'The Foreigner' can be reviewed as an attempt to plumb man's origin of dilemmas. Sindi's alienation is of the soul and not of the geography. As he himself confides,
his foreignness lies 'within' him and drives him from crisis to crisis. When June suggests him to marry her, he reminds her how they are leading a lonely life with a vacuum around them.

Sindi absolutely forgets his existence. He thinks he is a non entity. Like the protagonist Yonk in the American play 'Hairy Ape' who has completely forgotten about himself, Sindi at times looks hollow. There is a motion of paranoid a psychological set back of void that rules him. He lacks the definite frame of morality and the system of values. He feels himself stranger in India. He is not fortunate enough to have been born with the simpleness of mind. His existential drifting over the surface of the earth and his experimentation with self only intensify his dismal loneliness and acute sense of meaningfulness of life. He tries to seek, finally, in detachment a solution to his problems.

The man is caught in a vicious circle. The plight of the modern man can be discussed in a set of five inter-related operational conditions, viz., powerlessness, normlessness, isolation, self-estrangement and meaninglessness, which he considers to be different manifestations of alienation.

Arun Joshi traces the reasons for the intractable problems of modern man. The Foreigner presents detachment as a possible panacea for life's problems. Sindi's moral growth depends in fact, upon his search for detachment. 'I don't want to get involved' says he, though 'everywhere I turned I saw involvement'. He considers involvement to be the root cause of all problems. In the initial stage he becomes 'detached from everything'
except himself. It is June's death which finally breaks his attachment to himself. It is his detachment that is responsible for the tragedy of Babu and June. Sindi says,

"When I had sought only detachment I had driven a man to his death".

Sindi's detachment does not seem to be wise. His detachment makes him shirk his responsibility.

What is acceptable to one individual is rejected by the other. Arun Joshi explores the individual's anguished consciousness of being isolated from the whole apparatus of social convention and ritual. The theme of anxiety arising out of the chaos prevalent in modern life, which makes its first appearance in 'The Foreigner', is more effectively treated in Arun Joshi's novels.

It may be due to the impaired outlook that the characters complicate their lives. In a mood of despair that envelopes his being the water surrounding a fish, Sindi gets his second insight into the nature of life. "Detachment at that time had meant inaction. Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it". His earlier detachment with the world has now been replaced by a fervent but unselfish attachment.
Out of many psychological factors, the theme of anxiety runs deep in novels like "The Foreigner", "The Strange Case of Billy Biswas" where man's feeling of anxiety and alienation rule the roost. The protagonist Bimal or Billy Biswas comes of the upper-upper crust of Indian Society. Though born and brought up in comfort and affluence, his awareness of the deeper layers of his personality makes him something like an existential being, alienated from the superficial reality of life.

The ordered, systematised civilised life which the contemporary man is proud of, intensifies Billy's problem of identity. He develops a bitter aversion for the civilised world and a strong streak of primitivism, a great force, unkraft, a...a primitive force" is evident in him even when he is in America. On his return to India he feels like a visitor from the wilderness to the marts of a Big City. The kitchen culture of the affluent India, which his wife Meena represents, makes him an exile. The novel, so to say lives through a tension between the two ends of a given civilisation.

The grotesque behaviour, of the protagonists is not originated from the blood but cultivated in the course of their life". The Strange Case of Billy Biswas", is a study in the total alienation of its protagonist Billy Biswas from the modern bourgeois society of India. It is the strident criticism testifying to a loss of confidence in the anglicized Indian tradition of high culture.

All of a sudden, Billy is seized by a phantoon which makes him anxious to leave the so called civilised world of greed, avarice, riches and hypocrisy. Billy mysteriously vanishes into a hilly region of Madhya Pradesh. His love for the primitive life makes him leave his wife, his only
child and his aged parents. Ignoring family responsibility and societal obligation, Billy, disappears in the Saal forest. His restless soul escapes from the civilization to the jungle.

"The Strange Case of Billy Biswas" aims at delineating the human predicament. Billy like Sindi, is in search of a human world of emotional fullness of a world of meaningful relatedness. Billy is aware of the deeper layers of his personality and feels totally alienated from the superficial reality of life.

Unable to fix himself in one place or another, Sindi visits various places endlessly like the wanderings of Scholar Gipsy. On returning to India, he feels he is a fish out of water and sees no other way out but to fly from the civilised, sophisticated modern society. So he vanished into Saal forests. Even before his physical disappearance into the jungles, Billy ceased to belong to the world.

The regeneration in the outlook of Sindi does not permit him to accept the changed values. The terrible shock he feels at his degradation provokes his flight from meaningless civilised world. Billy is thus a refugee from civilisation, the tenacity with which he pursues his quest in "an incoherent and meaningless world", is really astounding. Billy withdraws from the civilized world because it begins to make inroads into his own character. He remembers that all his life he had primitive self. He recapitulates: "I certainly underwent a deep metamorphosis that was, no doubt, responsible for all that I did subsequently layer upon layer was peeled off me until nothing but my primitive self was left trembling (T.S.C.B.B. p.46).
It is to be noted that Joshi's another novel, 'The Apprentice' also depicts the plight of the contemporary man, who is "sailing about in a confused society without norms, without direction, without even a purpose" (T.F. p.74). Ratan Rathor is a child of a double inheritance. His father was patriotic and courageous, but his mother was endowed with worldly wisdom. Ironed by these two conflicting philosophies of life, Ratan finds it extremely difficult from the very beginning to live smoothly in the "Petrified and frozen" world of civilisation. Ratan faced dehumanizing materialism of today. But he was endowed with the heightened sensibility. He felt crashed under the growing weight of meaninglessness and isolation from his innermost nature and surroundings. He was almost in a high string mental condition, which threatens to ravage his soul and deprive him of his personality and identify.

A comparison can be drawn between Ratan Rathor and Sindi Oberoi. Ratan undergoes a profound change. While he tries to seek "Solace from the annals of corruption, his dying conscience keeps on pricking him. At every stage he puts up an initial resistance only to discover the futility of his efforts. The whole business of lining in a muddle confuses him all the more and he fails to differentiate between right and wrong.

"The feeling generated in me a great confusion. What was right, what was wrong? what was the measure for doing things or not doing them? (T.A. pp.72-73)."
The conflict between the material acquisition and moral stability never ends so easily in the novels of Arun Joshi. In "The Apprentice" Joshi has projected the individual endowed with heightened sensibility feels powerless and isolated from his authentic self as well as from the world outside which has become chaotic, brutal and insensitive. Though Ratan's docility and hard work enable him to climb the ladder of bureaucracy, he feels restless in this unjust and in congruous world.

Yet another point of trouble that comes to Ratan is the constant prick of economic instability. Ratan Rathor suffers from unemployment tortures. He finds unbearable at times when he was looked at examined, interviewed, interrogated and rejected. Due to these, he has created himself an inferiority complex. He has failed to obtain even the lowliest of jobs. To fail in Delhi, a city of opportunities would be the sign of the greatest incompetence. When he has fallen ill due to heat stroke he had no one to fall back upon. This was most embarrassing of all a shameful memory that he had neither job, money nor people to take care of him.

Ratan was made an instrument for making ridicule. Ratan was insulted by his colleagues for his servile behaviour to his superior. He could not sleep in the nights of humiliation when he felt ashamed, when darkness was full of insults and mockings. They criticised him adducing his material urge as bemoaning force in his life.

"Ratan was a whore" His friend Sheik used to say, "darkness reveals all darkness of the night or of death". 
Joshi has made his protagonists pass through unsurmountable difficulties. It can be said as one of the reasons for their depressed attitude. Emptiness and silence are hard to bear. But one has to make life through this emptiness and silence. Ratan felt only restlessness, depressed and uncomfortable. Many things disturbed him but what disturbed him the most was when he expected new achievements, new standards, there was no standards only boredom and discontent burst periodically into panic.

Ratan views that no man is an island. But he is not clear in his idea. He says "I was quite certain that I was a lump apart . . . that could be the disease of the body".

Sindi Oberoi in 'The Foreigner', Som Bhaskar in 'The Last Labyrinth' Billy Biswas in "The Strange Case of Billy Biswas", Ratan Rathor in "The Apprentice" are all frustrated men sailing about in a confused society, a society without norms, without direction, without even a purpose. So they are a nobody. People live like servants to their superiors burying their likes, dislikes, creatively, skill, knowledge, pleasures etc. They live alone in their anger, the terrible loneliness hiding in their hearts the failures and humiliations. Their souls are turning to ashes due to this anger towards the society - the superior society. They are tired and fed up in their body and spirit.

"What existed was not written by God but by a silly society that would do anything for money" says Ratan.
One problem leads to another. It is almost a vicious circle. One never knows what emptiness lies within one and which, when the time comes Ratan for the first time in his life he thought of death. Before he became old, he had to settle in life with more money and honour. But more he accumulated the money, the more he was dissatisfied and more lonely.

It is quite palpable that the characters are not able to decipher any meaning for each of their moves. Ratan always has a confusion between what is good? And what is evil? He even talks about renouncement, Karma, rebirth and teachings of Gita. As Brigadier, his best friend says "It is a great waste of time to have such speculations and questioning oneself with utmost confusion. But one can't stop questioning. It is like a disease, getting worse and worse".

Joshi has carved the characters in such a way, they are not criminals. Ratan has a sense of dejection that he has been the cause for the death of his friend. He confides to his friend about his getting bribe though with a sense of shame. When Ratan has been arrested by the police for supplying the defective arms to the defence over and over he churned the facts in his mind hoping to discovers a straw, a means of escape. He was not helped by any one to come away from the jaws though he had many friends. He was all alone in the jail.

Ratan feels how he spent his life in panic, boredom frustration and restlessness.
The psychological concept of "who am I" can be applied to these principal characters of Joshi, for they are shrouded by their own doubts. A certain awareness of man's rootlessness and the consequential loneliness and anxiety is the keynote of Arun Joshi's unique vision of the predicament of modern man in contemporary Indo-English fiction. Psychic aberrations of Sindi Oberoi in 'The Foreigner', which emanate from his orphaned and neglected childhood, push him into untoward relationships and keep him rootless, of foreigner till the end. Billy Biswas in 'The Strange Case of Billy Biswas' is driven by great force, a primitive force, unkraft and seek his roots in the company of a primitive tribe resulting in tragic end to himself. Ratan Rathor in 'The Apprentice' suffers deeper and deeper to extricate himself from his position turns more and more intangible and elusive.

A close reading of 'The Foreigner' reveals that the book is not concerned with any East-West cultural confrontation of the kind that one notices in 'The Serpent and the Rope' or in the novels of Kamala Markandaya, Santha Rama Rau and B. Rajan. Its main thematic concern is the quest of a confused individual, who is alienated from the rest of the world, for the meaning and purpose of his existence. His search is directed towards the discovery of emotional wholeness, identity and self-knowledge as well as the readjustment or reorientation of values. O.P. Bhatnagar aptly remarks: "It is the need for growth, maturity and human wisdom which is the theme of the novel and not east-west confrontation as one might discover from the surface reading of the work".
Sindi's encounters with other characters in the novel take place at the individual, not on cultural, level. In fact, none of the characters in this world of 'foreigners' is particularly conscious of being Indian or American or European.

Since he finds it difficult to digest himself of his past, adjustment to American life with its different value-system becomes impossible for him. In his splenetic outburst against Mr. Khemka, who ignorantly attempts to devolve the responsibility of Babu's death on June, Sindi says: "You had given him the wrong set of memories. He had ambition and a reason to live. He had, roots, God and, above all, the love of his parent and his sister to fall back on. "But they had sent him out before his God could take care of him. They had almost wanted him to destroy his roots. In the end he didn't have any reason to live either.

Babu lives in a strange world of dreams so much so that the hard facts of life prove stronger for him. And the pity of it is that the dreams he lives in are not his own: "They were products of the turbid flotsam of a rotting social class he was supposed to perpetuate". (T.F. p.56) What makes the situation further difficult for Babu is his abnormal dread of his father who is fastidious, domineering and possessive. Mr. Khemka loves his son as he loves a factory. Babu is a 'pawn' in his plans. He wanted to marry off Babu to inherit, breed in him a strong sense of conformity rather than individually of character. He is left with no chance to develop an individually.
Both Sindi and June realize this and advise Babu to get rid of his father-fixation which turns out to be a terrible hindrance on the way of his growing up and of attaining emotional maturity. Sindi, exasperated by Babu's callowness and excessive dependence on his father, says to him. "It is high time you ceased to be an innocent little rich-father's-boy... unless you grow up and get him out of your system, this country is going to grind your face right into its grubby trash cans and no one will even notice". (T.F. p.151) June, too, feels after her own bitter experience with Babu: "This father of his seems to be an awful bully. I am sure things would be much simpler if he were not always there in the background, sending those long sermons and telling him what's wrong with him and how he should carry himself".

From the moment of their first meeting at Sindi's apartment, Babu feels fascinated by the friendly and humane June. Callous and selfish as he is, Babu never thinks of others when he wants something. He feels relieved when Sindi tells him that he and June are just friends and that he has no plan and soon they grow intimate.

The more Babu gets involved with June, the more he fails miserably in his studies. He is seriously warned by the University authorities. In a way, Babu's failure to cope up with the American System of education is symptomatic of his grater failure to grapple with the ways of life in that country with his innocence and wrong set of values and memories. But this does not prevent him from carrying on with June. He becomes awfully dependent on her and loves her with 'a dog-like devotion'. (129) In spite of
his determination not to get entangled in the affair of Babu and June, Sindi cannot help being ruffled. The thought of losing June makes him afraid and his love for her takes a new turn. It is streaked with hatred and anger. He becomes jealous, greedy, selfish and possessive things he has struggled against for years.

The wavering tendency in Sindi makes him feeble. It is because of this frailty, that his very existence is at stake. He is aware of his pettiness. 'But the realisation was of little help, considering the fact that I had almost lost my will-power. I had permitted myself to become a battlefield where the child and the adult warred unceasingly. The child usually came on top'. His selfishness and detachment estrange June from him and never for a moment the thought of marrying June as a price of retaining her strikes him. In the face of ensuing disaster, the prophet of detachment and the champion of procrastination feels: 'There was nothing to be done but wait. Wait and wait and let the past determine the future. (T.F. p.118) Herein lies the rub, the root of Sindi's failure in love as in life. His detachment is a detachment manqué, a veneer to cover his selfishness and a means to avoid reality with its squalid, repellent and pain racked conditions.

Sindi is jolted out of self-complacency by the unexpected turn of events. Faced with the great wreckage that his detachment has caused, he feels baffled. He says, "All along I had acted out of greed, selfishness and vanity and had hurt nobody very much. When I had come close to gaining true detachment and had acted out of goodness, I had driven a man to his
death. He suffers from a terrible sense of guilt and begins to see June in a new light. She carried death with her. She had been an accomplice in a murder and she didn’t even know it. But ignorance of sin, like ignorance of the law, is no excuse.

Babu’s death has knocked something out of him. He is not the same person anymore: "I turned around and peered at my reflection in the dirty window glass of a cheap clothing store. I did look rather strange. With this self-estrangement all his confidence in the world is lost. As his long-cherished theories and beliefs are disproved, he feels helpless and at a loss. There is nothing left that he can depend upon. Sindi is confronted by the utter vacuity of his life: "I felt like a desert or like a vast field of naked oaks in winter time.

The question of existence for Sindi Oberoi in ‘The Foreigner’ always hangs in balance. He does not find any grey area to lead a peaceful life. It is clearly proved that Sindi Oberoi in ‘The Foreigner’ is very week in both the physical needs and mental stability. His feeling of nakedness in the hands of existence" grows stronger with every passing day. And he is possessed by a strong urge to roam once again the streets of the world: "I didn’t know where I would go or what the future held for me, but one thing was certain: my search had to continue. He is yearning inconsolably to carve out a little niche for him in the world.

With the flip of a coin he decides for India. Going to India, the land of his ancestors, is like ‘going home’ to him and it brings a new kind of experience into his life. Sindi adds, "I thought of the departure as a
process of walking up a ramp and a day later finding myself in an enchanted land where nobody recognised me and I could start life anew". His future is bleak and uncertain and his only consolation remains in the prospect of a new beginning.

Just before his departure to India, Sindi receives a horrifying letter from June. She is on the brink of despair, of total break-down. Whatever courage and strength she had left after Babu's death have evaporated with the frightening revelation that she is carrying Babu's child. She is completely at a loss and in utter desperation she seeks Sindi's help. The thoughts of June's plight perpetrated by Babu's innocence and the stupidity of his father, his sister and his entire society and of Babu gaining victory over him even in his death stifle Sindi with an indefinable hatred. Sindi reveals, "The spring was black with my hatred. It infested the sky-scrapers and hung over the city like a pall of infectious fall-out.

Sindi airdashes to Boston only to find June dead. She has failed to survive an unsuccessful abortion. The news with its unexpectedness and shock almost paralyzes his mind. Standing in the empty room of June with a sleuth behind him, Sindi attempts to decipher 'the dark hieroglyphs of the shadows' and 'the darkness for a clue to the abominable absurdity of the world' (T.F. p.191). He goes to the river bank and, while watching the dawn that breaks over the dark water, he receives his second insight into the mystery of existence. Detachment consisted of right action had not escape from it. Sindi wanders about on 'the cheque-board of despair and hope' for the next few weeks and in the sanctuary of his laboratory in Newyork he engages himself in an excruciating process of self-examination and self-purification.
Joshi's novel points to a growing extent of alienation that is appearing in contemporary India among the sensitive youth, artists and intellectuals. Billy's predicament results from his bi-cultural situation. His is the authentic problem of a perceptive young man belonging to the Westernized Indian society that has lost its spiritual anchorage. He suffers from discontent, a sense of irrelevance of life and a constant blurring of reality. The normal confusion prevailing in the post-Independence Indian society is voiced by Billy thus:

What got me was the superficiality, the sense of values... I don't think I have ever met a more pompous, a more mixed-up lot of people. Artistically, they were dry as dust. Intellectually, they could no better than mechanically mouth ideas that the West abandoned a generation ago. Their idea of romance was to go and see an American movie or go to one of those wretched restaurants and dance with their wives to a thirty-year-old tune. Nobody remembered the old songs, or the meaning of the festivals. All the sensuality was gone. So was the poetry. All that was left was loud mouthed women and men in three-piece suits dreaming their little adulteries... The only thing that I could see them worrying about was money why couldn't they make more of it.

Such a downright rejection of his society cannot come from a negative attitude. Joshi's novel, despite its harsh indictment of the material concerns and spiritual degeneration of the upper-class Indian society, is undoubtedly positive about the need for a guiding vision, whether mystical or moral, to encounter the contemporary confusion of
values. It is this vision that ignites the imagination of his non-conformist hero and enables him to look critically at the root of the decay that corrodes our culture from within and without, to see what has been lost and how it can be regained.

The dramatic conflict between individual and society, as depicted in The Strange Case, thus, turns out, in a sense, to be a struggle between two antithetical cultures and attitudes to life. The antagonistic relation between man and his environment is reflected in the plot of the novel that derives its dramatic tension from a confrontation of two conflicting forces. Since the conflict is more of a psychological nature, the protagonist, Billy Biswas, is presented in his own inner struggle.

The conflict reaches the height of tragedy because Billy's attempt to stand up against his society results not from simple error of judgement or lack of insight but from his genuine concern about the precipitate erosion of the traditional values of his society. The confrontation ends in the destruction of the uncompromising hero by the society that has no place in it for rebels.

Though Billy has stayed in America for long, he, unlike Sindi Oberoi, has not lost his roots in India and does not "suffer much, except for passing spells of loneliness, from that alienation that many other Indians seemed to be burdened witty" (T.S.C.B.B. p.25). He has the advantage of a shared background. While uprootedness is the source of Sindi's alienation, his lack of commitment, and pusillanimity, Billy retains his roots in the tradition of his society and draws his strength and sense
of purpose from his inner vision. Consequently, he is not bothered about cultural roots that men like Sindi desperately seek. He is concerned with deeper and far more with the mysteries of life. His entire life is attuned to that mysterious, primitive urge which finds occasional expressions in incidents already referred to and in his informal talks with his confidants like Romi and Tuula which reveal "not only the mind of the speaker but also the dark unknowable layers of the mysterious world that surrounded us".

Billy - a misfit in civilised America soon finds himself "itching to be back" (T.S.C.B.B. p.27) in India. His 'itching' is symptomatic of his craving for deeper things in life which are absent in white America and in the Anglicized Indian society and which the primitive society of Central India subsequently comes to represent. Billy returns to Delhi to experience only a change of scene with the reality remaining almost the same as in white America. In fact, the upper-upper crust of Indian society in Delhi which he originally hails from, is as spiritually dead and empty as materialistic America. The people he meets here are nothing more than a group of artistically dry and intellectually bar.

Primitivism is a revelation of modern man's alienation from his deepest self and from nature. At the root of all primitivism works of art, there is a strong urge for reintegration and a sincere and passionate struggle to recover the lost vitality and wholeness of being. Mathur and Rai aptly remark that The Strange Case is a fictional representation of the "universal myth of the primitive in the heart of man ever alienating him from the superficial and polished banalities of modern civilization".3
Although he did not give up his play-acting and went on keeping up appearances, he felt alone and friendless in office and at home. He could not communicate his agony even to his wife and to his daughter for the fear that they would not understand him. So, "the silence remained. The panic remained. And I remained alone". A gloomy sense of painful and boundless isolation welled up in him and he felt, like rudderless, that he had cut himself off from everything and everybody else. Ratan's extreme helplessness, his ineffable agony and solitude are also reminiscent of those of the Ancient Mariner:

"Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony".

This is the anguish of a man when he finds himself alone and robbed of all familiar ties and is faced with the emptiness and darkness of his guilt-tormented soul. Ratan went through terrible days and nights devoid of peace, sleep and consolation: "no occurrence, no conversation, no visit of either friend or foe, no sleep, in spite of the sleeping pills that our good doctor gave me, no relief, no respite from the hands that pulled me steadily down towards those caverns where, I felt certain, the Brigadier had gone". The pangs of conscience had, thus, begun to rack him and his grief-crazed soul suffered inconsolably.
Earlier he believed, like a colleague of his, that life was 'a zero' and that one could deduct nothing from a zero. But now he saw the fallacy in the argument. He learnt that one could take things out of a zero and make it negative. Life would become negative if one took out of it one's 'sense of shame', one's honour. This marked the measure of change that had come over him. This change is effected by a deep-seated belief in the metaphysical calculation of a tradition that regards 'shunya' or 'zero' not as something negative but as something meaningful and positive. Ratan's despair and extreme sense of nothingness were, thus metamorphosed into a wholesome and constructive attitude.

It was at this stage that the advice of his father came back to Ratan's mind: "Be good, Be decent. Be of use". He chose to expiate his sin by putting himself and his soul to use. At first he was confused about the ways and means of his spiritual rehabilitation and of getting rid of the worries that he has made out of his own intentions.

Som Bhaskar, a typical product of the Indian upper-crust, is unable to come to terms with life because of his failure to come to terms with himself. His Western trained intellect nourished by Cartesian rationalism and Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest is sceptical of Indian spiritual thoughts and religious beliefs. But his rationalism and logical approach provide him with no clue to the dilemma that he is faced with. His loneliness and spiritual uprootedness remain and the sort of affirmation that his predecessors - Sindi Oberoi, Billy Biswas and Ratan Rathor - attained at the end of their excruciating but productive encounter
with life, eludes him. He is lost to the end in introspective solitude and waits for his encounter with the last labyrinth, death which alone can, perhaps, resolve his doubts and contradictions.

The word 'labyrinth' and its analogues like 'maze' and 'impasse' recur in all of Joshi's novels. But it is only in 'The Last Labyrinth' that the word comes to acquire a thematic resonance and a metaphoric inclusiveness. It is associated with the protagonist's attempt to unravel the mysteries of life, love, death and divinity. The word 'labyrinth' has been used in its literal and metaphoric senses by various writers before Joshi.

He flirts from one woman to another, from one business venture to a new one, but far from attaining a sense of fulfilment, he grows even more dissatisfied. In the melancholy isolation of his sleepless nights, the insane but intense chant of discontent becomes even more strident. The fact that he has no clue to this sense of void is the symptom of his malaise: "If I stayed up all night chaffing tranquilizers, not knowing why I was awake, and came close to tears because I did not know, it came pretty close to sorrow".

His womanizing and boozing to shut up the voices in his incurable voids have not settled anything. His troubles get multiplied by an awareness of the irrelevance of life. Life becomes a complicated affair, 'a labyrinth within the labyrinth' like the lanes of Benaras, comparable to 'meaningless flights of stairs' or 'a fisherman's net'. He always feels hunted 'like a hare chased by unseen hounds', a 'worn-out weary man incapable
of spontaneous feeling'. He suffers from an ennui and a loathing for life: 'I felt a new loathing for the squalid world that carried on beneath my hospital window. All those buses and cars and taxis and men scurrying back and forth like cockroaches'. Everything is in a-haze. He loses his bearings and is afflicted with a sense of dislocation.

It must, however, be admitted that Som Bhaskar's peculiar situation is chiefly not of his own making; he has inherited it as much from his ancestors - his father and grandfather in particular - as from his age. Som is an offspring of the secular-temporal Western world where religious belief has become impossible. It is the world of scientific and technological progress, of logic, rationalism and expediency in which dogmatic postulates taken on faith are suspect since there is no evidence to substantiate them.

Som, with all his rationalism and logic, constantly suffers from illusions. He is never sure whether Lal Haveli with its labyrinth is a figment of an over-heated imagination, a 'make-belief' of Aftab Rai as Anuradha calls it, or a reality. It goes to the credit of Arun Joshi that the two worlds - the world of Benaras with its mystery and vagueness and that of Bombay where everything is clear and straightforward are never quite merged.

Fed up of his hopeless longings and inner confusion, Som meets Gargi for a cure. Gargi is a radiant and rosy woman of forty with a charming generous but enigmatic smile. Herself a mystic, she is the daughter of a Sufi pir who had miraculously cured Aftab's blindness. She is full of compassion and understanding but, being a deaf-mute, she can
communicate her insight only through signs, gestures and writing. She compels his respect and for a time Som falls under her spell. Even though he does not quite understand her, Som feels that Gargi, like her Upanishadic counterpart, may hold all the answers he seeks. He implores her: "I am fed up of this restlessness... So absolutely fed up. Can you help me?" Gargi, deeply touched, writes on her pad: 'God will send someone to help you... Someone who has known suffering', meaning obviously Anuradha whom, on another occasion, she refers to as Som's Shakti.

The novel ends where it began. Som Bhaskar stays awake, listening to the roaring hollowness in the crevices of his soul and putting down in his minute book the 'thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season'. His loneliness and spiritual agony remain acute. The circular plot suggests the circular nature of Som's journey. There is no progression in his character. Unlike the other protagonists of Joshi, he does not grow. His dilemma remains unresolved - as he finds no escape route out of the intricate labyrinth in which he is lost. One wonders if the failure of Som Bhaskar is a deliberate attempt on the part of Joshi to reproduce the reality of life where a readymade solution to such a complex problem is seldom found. There is a semblance of reality that the protagonists of Joshi lead an empty life because of their own illusion and self infliction.
WORKS CITED


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