CHAPTER-IV

THE APPRENTICE

The Inner Consciousness of the Individual
The Apprentice (1974), like its predecessors The Foreigner (1968) and The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1971), probes deeper into the inner consciousness of the individual with a view of exploring, what Arun Joshi calls, "that mysterious underworld which is the human soul".1 In all these novels, Joshi delineates the painful predicament of his protagonists. Today, in all walks of life, there is chaos, confusion, corruption, hypocrisy and absurdity. The contemporary individual endowed with superb sensitivity feels powerless and alienated from his own self as well as his surroundings. He seems to be a victim of the "petrified and frozen" society of the modern dehumanised world which does not suit his temperament, and all efforts for adjustment prove suicidal to him. He, therefore, takes a bold step to reject the ways of the so called civilized world and tries his best to discover some meaning of his existence.

Joshi's third novel, The Apprentice, which is inspired by Albert Camus The Fall, also depicts the pitiable plight of the contemporary man "sailing about in a confused society without norms, without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose". (74). It is a confessional novel wherein the narrator - protagonist unfolds the story of his life in the form of an
internal monologue. Ratan Rathor, who is both the hero and the anti-hero of the novel, probes into his inner life and exposes the perfidy, chicanery, cowardice and corruption of his own character at the mock-heroic level. He is a thoroughly existentialist character who conforms to the doctrine that man forms his essence in the course of the life he chooses to lead, and, as Sartre would put it, in his choice lies his freedom. He is neither a rebel like Billy Biswas nor a rootless foreigner like Sindi Oberoi. He is a practical man who, getting his idealism shattered in the corrupt society, proposes to survive by sycophancy and practically adapts himself to the mysterious ways of the world. The novel is both a treatise on current social and political scene and a lament of a tormented soul. It reminds us of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*. Here the social reality becomes the nucleus of the novel wherein Ratan, like Sindi and Billy, comes out yet another reflective introvert whose life corresponds to bitter social norms and consequently undergoes suffering and, of course, salvation towards the close.

"The novel enacts three stages in the human-divine comedy of Ratan. The pre-independence period is the dawn, the period of idealism, the phase of innocence, the post-independent India is the broad daylight of experience, the inferno of corruption, the last part the area of expiation, is the door to
The title of the novel, seemingly prosaic, in fact provides a clue to its nature and significance. 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". 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.³ (P.143)

The full force and significance of these unadorned and unemphatic words of Ratan' 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 withdraws 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 become 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 and 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 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 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 Ghosh. 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 dislodge 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” (P.141) 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-defence 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 Broning-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, (Joy Abraham 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 Prasad 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.

There are certain recognisable similarities in the narrative strategy and content between *The Apprentice* and Albert Camus’ *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’. 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 is 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”.11 His trade sign would be “a double face, a charming Janus, with the motto: ‘Don’t rely on it’”.12 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 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 from 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 Day 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 difference”, 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” (P.7). 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” (P.6) 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”, (P.9) 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” (P.10). 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 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” (P.12). This traumatic experience remained 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"(P.14) 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".(P.15) 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".(P.18) 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 is 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.(P.19) 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". 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. (P.27)

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 pretense 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 high “right” that he should “rise in life higher than the others aspired for”(P.31) Most scandalising was his moving house without taking 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".(P.38) 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”. (P.39) 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 doubt, 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”? (P.40)

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 changes 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". (P.41) 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 bride of ten thousand rupees offered to change his noting, he "felt both righteous and proud", though the bride 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". (P.42) 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". (P.42-43) 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 man 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. (P.43).

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, realises how he himself succumbed to the widespread amoral, utilisation 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".(P.44)

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" (P.49).

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" (P.52). 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”. (P.54-55) 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.

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”. In this abrupt revelation of Ratan’s there is a touch of drama, but it is justifiable because he is not play acting 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. 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, through 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".19.

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.20. 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.

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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. What is 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, emerges as a positively changed man, grown mature in outlook, and socially responsible.
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1. Arun Joshi, The Apprentice (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1993), P. 70. All subsequent textual references are to this edition.


3. The Apprentice, P. 143


5. The Apprentice, P. 141.


8. V.V.N. Rajendra Prasad, Five Indian Novelists (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1990), P. 118.


12. Ibid., P.36


18. Tapan Kumar Ghosh regards as it 'anti-climatic' - See his *Arun Joshi's Fiction*, P. 102.

19. Ibid., P.91

20. Ibid., P.103.

21. Ibid., P.62.