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**RATAN RATHORE - AS AN APPRENTICE PRESENTED**

**BY ARUN JOSHI**

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**ABSTRACT**

The *Apprentice* is chronologically the third novel by Arun Joshi. The novel, depicts the pitiable plight of the contemporary man who is roaming without any norm, direction, purpose in the society and very confused too. It is a confessional novel where in the narrator-protagonist Ratan Rathore, 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 deeper into his inner life and exposes the perfidy, chicanery, cowardice and corruption of his own character at the mock-heroic level. The action of the novel takes place in India, though there are references to the British rule. The social scenario of the post-independence period becomes the background of the novel. He is nevertheless always haunted by morbid fear of losing his job and suffers from keen desire for getting promotion and an intense preoccupation with work. He is almost invariably in a high strung mental condition. He has a powerful instinct for survival through defiance.

**Keywords:** *Survival, Crisis of Character*

**INTRODUCTION**

The *Apprentice* is chronologically the third novel by Arun Joshi. The action of the novel takes place in India, though there are references to the British rule. Educationally, Ratan Rathor, the hero of this work of fiction, is a “homespun” one. He has received no higher education beyond the frontiers of the Punjab. The novel, depicts the pitiable plight of the contemporary man “sailing about in a confused society without norms, without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose” (TA 74). Educationally, Ratan Rathor, the protagonist is a “homespun” one. He has received no higher education beyond the frontiers of the Punjab.

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He is a practical man and a victim, whose idealism getting shattered in the corrupt society, proposes to survive by sycophancy and practically adapts himself to the mysterious ways of the world.

## **RATAN RATHORE – THE PROTAGONIST**

Ratan Rathor, the narrator-protagonist, comes of an impoverished urban middle-class family. He has to find his own way and pay his own price in this world. He is a child of double inheritance. He as a young man has two distinct parts of his self - the higher-self consists of the patriotic and ideal world of his father and the lower-self consists of the worldly wisdom of his mother.. Ratan becomes a split-personality. His lower-self is dictating him for the pursuit of career in life whereas his higher-self asks him to join the army raised by Subhas Chandra Bose.

Ratan thinks of his officer, the Superintendent closer to a pontiff or a high priest of an exclusive cult who becomes a key to his career. A peculiar instinct for survival overwhelms him and he works very hard. The desire for getting promotion makes him lose his identity. With the help of his obedience and docility he wins the confidence of the Superintendent. In a very short time of six months, on the recommendation of the Superintendent, he gets confirmed in the service on his assurance that he would marry the Superintendents niece. His journey as an office clerk begins and further corruption of his soul is only a matter of time.

Henceforward, he never looks back and on the Superintendents retirement gets his coveted post which brings for him every comfort in life, denied to his parents. In this Ratan has grasped the pulse of the time and this makes him rise upward, though it is through his corrupt practice in which he is just a cog in the corrupt official machinery. Sometimes he gets so fed up with the corrupt practices that he thinks of deliverance through death, like a few of the existentialist characters do. Ratan has lost his self and felt the anguish of loss. Though at times he contemplates:

I embarked upon the solemn and relentless pursuit of a career...  
when I would always calm down, and ask myself: What can be done?  
Here I am. And here is the filth. What can I do? How can I get  
away?... One had to live. And, to live, one had to make a living. And  
how was living to be made except through careers. (TA 39)

Since Ratan has embarked on building a career, he has to agree to marry his boss's niece. In fact, his own marriage is a "deal" (48) for his career. Ratan realizes the practical importance of negotiations and deals in life. By now he comes to know that the world runs on the basis of deals:

If men forgot how to make deals the world come to a stop... it is not  
atom or the sun or God or sex that lies at the heart of the universe: it is  
DEALS. (TA 48)

Ratan becomes a modern man in a full sense of the term - cunning, deceptive, selfish and easy-going. He goes to fetch his mother to see the girl he has to marry knowing full well that her consent is mere a formality and feels that his marriage has also been degraded into a deal. The night in the train while going to call his mother, becomes a painful nightmare for him. He suffers from humiliation, and cannot sleep for many nights:

...nights of humiliation, nights when you are ashamed of something,  
ashamed of yourself, when the darkness is full of insults, pointing  
fingers and mocking laughter. (TA 47).

After his marriage, Ratan becomes an officer, and within a couple of days of India becoming a Republic. Though he rises in life through corrupt practices, he is far from achieving satisfaction. He now owns a car, flat of his own, refrigerator, and has twenty thousand rupees in the bank. Though Ratan's docility and hard work enable him to climb the ladder of bureaucracy, he always feels restless in this unjust and incongruous world.

Ratan Rathor emphasizes this aspect of the crisis of Indian character in his article and shows it to so many of his colleagues that they nickname him "Mr. Crisis of Character" (TA 57) but this does not weaken his enthusiasm. Clearly, he has travelled a great distance from the raw youth who had written so bombastically and confidently on the crisis of character. He is caught in the dark labyrinth of life and is unable to follow the light that is within him. In spite of his promotion and material gains, he does not feel at home in such a corrupt atmosphere though, and he has the satisfaction of swimming and not sinking. But despite all this, Ratan Rathor confesses:

You see, to cut a long story short just before the war started I took a  
bribe. An enormous bribe. Yes "Mr. Crisis of character" took an  
enormous bribe. No more, no less. (TA 60)

Ratan goes on to explain how he had to accept the bribe. He doggedly struggles through the political and ethical questions involved when making war purchases. The

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situation now shifts to the freedom struggle and to the time of the Chinese invasion. In such an agonized conscience Ratan meets Himmat Singh, the Sheikh, and the Superintendent of the section of war materials. The Sheikh who offers him into a big bribe and tempts him into a big bargain for the supply of defective war materials to the Army. Ratan stoops low little realizing the fact that it is related to the security of his country. He derives courage from his observation that everyone is busy amassing wealth by exploiting the opportunities thrown out by the war. He watches with utter dismay that people have started hoarding commodities such as badry food and antibiotics to sell them on much profit at the time of war. He approves of the defective war materials.

Ratan blames the prevailing atmosphere for his degradation. He finds himself trapped in the corrupt system where “men were weighed in Money or Power” (TA 62) limiting his option. His freedom has no meaning and it seems to be nothing but a word and sometimes he even gets disillusioned with the concept of and the word freedom:

Freedom, Freedom. What is Freedom but a word my friend ? Freedom of men, of nations. No more than a word... We thought we were free.

What we had in fact, was a new slavery with new masters. (TA 60-61)

Ratan wonders how he can be his own master when he has been smothered by a system. He is only “a weather-vane or blotting paper.” (TA 62) He justifies his action vehemently. Ratan had to accept the bribe from the Sheikh “for some obscure reasons,” (TA I61) thus selling away his soul to the devil. The Sheikh operated in such a way that nothing could be proved, as all the documents regarding the deal were to be destroyed, the Sheikh teaches Ratan the Machiavellian philosophy of life and he tells Ratan that only a fool and hypocrite likes getting killed.

In his official rise to success, Ratan never gives up magnanimity. He donates freely to charitable funds and writes patriotic letters to the editors of certain papers. He even donates blood to Red Cross for the national cause and inspires all Indians to rise as one nation. This is a fine justification of why Ratan starts taking bribes though he does not need money for any one of his needs with the accumulation of riches. Ratan “at once every man and nobody.” Ratan becomes obsessed with wealth and sacrifices the principles that have guided him during adolescence, a complete diversion from the ideals and morals dear to his mind and heart in youth. He calls himself a nobody without any identity:

I was a nobody, A NOBODY. Deep down I was convinced that I had lost significance; As an official; as a citizen; as a man. How could then

my actions have significance? What significance was there in steering a boat that had no destination or watering a tree that would never bear fruit. (TA 70).

In Bombay, he once gets engrossed in “fantasies of pleasure.” (TA 78) The world of Bombay, however also reminds him of the contrast between the simple life he led in the village and the life of city carrying on commerce and business and bargains. Ratans crisis of character always keeps on pricking him. He realizes that he is after wrong things but he cannot avoid being an accomplice in the official misdeeds.

The agonized state of Ratans mind results in his physical ailments. He himself observes slouch in his spine, as his body bends to one side. He loses his physical briskness and feels used up. Ratans wife is also unsatisfied in spite of their luxurious life and material prosperity. One evening when Ratan sits by the side of his wife inside the temple before the statue of God, he feels unnerved and speaks utterly disturbed:

That evening, as I sat with my wife at the temple before the great God, the God of courage and renunciation, that evening as I sat vowing and watering at the mouth before this great God, I was already beyond his pale. (TA 69).

After the Bombay episode he comes to learn of the return of his Brigadier friend from the fighting fronts of Indo-China War. The war is lost and the Brigadier, upon his return from the battle-front is suffering from nervous breakdown. When Ratan goes to visit him, he finds the Brigadier terribly shocked and emaciated:

The man whom I always looked up to and who had been the nicest to me was in panic, scared out of his wits. (TA 90)

The Brigadier is taken to the hospital and admitted in Emergency-Ward. It is worth stating that during their childhood days, the Brigadier had saved Ratans life when he was attacked by a group of hooligans. The Brigadier had leapt across the fallen bicycles to “fight for me, me who no one had ever fought for.” (TA 17) It is the irony of Fate that Ratan himself becomes responsible for the Brigadiers retreat from the war front and the consequent nervous breakdown. Ratan is horrified to see his friend in such a condition:

I watched him with a sense of doom. And watching him I remembered the autumn evenings on an athlete field and in the growing dusk the cry of the nightingales... It was the second time in my life that I had felt the pain of another as my own, the first being the time when my father was shot. (TA 100)

These situations make the element of the absurd in Ratans life much pronounced. In the meanwhile, the Brigadier shoots himself in the head. But the tragic death of his dearest benefactor friend, the Brigadier shakes Ratan to his roots. He is shaken out of his moral inertia when he sees the faceless head of his friend, the Brigadier. He is shocked to note that he has lost himself in becoming one with the process of career and business. The battle that rages inside himself after he discovered that he was the cause of the Brigadiers retreat and suicide, and worse still that he could have saved the Brigadier by confessing his crime. As he is directly responsible for the Brigadiers death, he calls himself as a criminal and a guilty man. “Upon me. Inside me. Like a boil. Like leprosy,” (TA 66) his conscience pricks him all the time.

When Ratan was called by the Superintendent of police for interrogation, he deceives him by saying that he has no knowledge about the clearance of the defective war materials which has caused the loss of several hundred lives. His reaction is full of surprise and of great indignation. He answers like a confirmed hypocrite. They tell him that they had plenty of evidence that he has cleared those war materials. While sitting on a stool in the small room at the police station, Ratan thinks of the after effect when people will come to know about his vile deeds. Ratan in police lock-up writes a letter of confession which he, however, does not submit. There is a conflict in his conscience whether he should confess or deny the allegations. He thinks of Honour, *Dharma*, *Maryada* and their values in life but lastly, he makes up his mind not to confess, because the authorities have no proof. Although Ratans subsequent release is made as a result of the interference of the Secretary and the Minister who were the agents behind the act.

Ratans dilemma reaches the stage of nightmarish impasse. Although Ratan has sought “solace from the annals of corruption,” (TA 112) at every stage he has put up an initial resistance but his efforts have become totally futile. He has always planned to pursue the right path but was invariably destroyed into a reprehensible proposition:

Thus, the charlatans won. And when they saw the charlatans winning the best became even less sure of themselves. And at times they turned charlatans. (TA 64)

Ratan deliberates upon the entire affair afresh and holds the Sheikh responsible for his one time benefactor and friends death; he goes to the Sheikh to take revenge upon him and charges the latter for seducing him to this evil. On this the Sheikh retorts:

You are bogus, Ratan Rathor Bogus. From top to bottom. Your work,  
your religion, your friendship, your honour, nothing but a pile of

dung. Nothing but poses a bundle of shams. (TA 131)

The Sheikh chides Ratan that one should not blame others for ones misdeeds and their fallouts. He also explains that Ratan alone has not been responsible for the deal and that there is a big racket involved in the deal, the Secretary and the Minister besides them and that he has been made a “scapegoat” (TA 131) only because he is “a spineless flunkey.” (TA 131) The Sheikh reveals to him that it is the callous and corrupt society that has made his mother a whore and his sister a vagrant, and that he has been forced to adopt devilish ways by social compulsions. By all these relations, Ratan understands the absurdity of his existence and reflects on his situation:

...that I saw more of myself that I had seen before. I did not yet know what had happened to me but one thing was clear: my life had been a great, great waste. (TA 135)

The corrupt world has a nauseating atmosphere which makes even Ratan vomit several times in the novel, especially when he sees his Brigadier friend in a hospital morgue, “In the corridor in the sand bucket I vomitted.” (TA 128) The corridor of the police station where Ratan has to stay one night also “smelled of piss.” (TA 109)

Ratans dilemma is typical of an average product of this highly sophisticated civilization. With a troubled conscience Ratan confesses to Himmat Singh, the Sheikh, that he goes from place to place in order to seek peace and solace within and without, and moral courage. Without finding it anywhere Ratan visits the temple which is nearby his house. He reaches there at the time of “aarti” (TA 118) and prays to Lord Krishna to give him strength to confess his crime as diverse thoughts have muddled his head:

I cried. Help me, O God, help me, I am in trouble and I have come to your door. Give me refuge. Give me courage. Just for a day lead me courage. Help me. (TA 118).

It can be seen that Ratan is entirely in the grip of duplicity, deception, selfishness and immorality prevailing in the modern society. From the temple he comes to his office and writes his letter of confession. He decides to meet the S.P. in the evening but later on he decides that not confess at all.

Ratans visit to the temple exposes him to the fact that even religion is not free from corruption. He meets the priest who is ready to grease Ratans palm to save his son who has used substandard material in the construction of some houses and, is now put into prison. In this way Joshi presents India as a nation plunged into corruption. God can be propitiated by

gifts in black money to his temples and the priests are themselves corrupt as Ratan sees for himself. After this Ratan never entered the temple again. Now the difference between a good man and successful man is clear to him. He comes to know that there is no limit to human depravity.

Ratan remembers how in the early phase of his service he had refused the bribe and destroyed the contractor. He wants to know if his act was right. He consults the Superintendent who remarks vaguely that, “only God existed and the quality of money is judged by the use to which it is put.” (TA 42-43) To the Superintendent, it is “the end that justifies the means.” (TA 43) Ratan listens him but fails to understand it and remembers his fathers idealism.

Now Ratan wants to know what he really is – “a master faker,” (TA 27) “a hypocrite,” (TA 27) “a sham” (TA 27) or “a martyrs son.” (TA 27) Such expressions scattered throughout the novel to stress Ratans tormented soul. It so happened that Ratan listens to a speech of a Swami who asks men to renounce his acts. Ratan does not understand it, How to renounce? Where to renounce? Whom to renounce? Naturally Ratan feels disturbed and bewildered. He is not concerned with the idea of good and evil. He wants to realize God only for knowing the relevance of his actions. He feels restless and experiences a war within himself. His restlessness grows as the time passes. His soul gets troubled. He feels lonely and self-alienated and this heightens the tragedy of Ratan. He says:

And all these years, I have been alone, so horribly alone in my anger, in my failures, carrying them in secret, like a thief, close to my heart, until their blazes have turned upon ... (TA 74-75)

A strange fear of death haunts Ratan all the time. He understands the gravity and weight of his ingratitude and sin. The dead Brigadiers vision trails him wherever he goes. His confessional dramatic monologues lay out the horrors harbouring his soul. This fear is his tragic flaw that leads him to the final catastrophe.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Ratan feels like doing something to change the prevailing situation. He learns that one cannot live for oneself because no human act is performed in isolation and therefore each act should be done with a sense of responsibility. With a deep urge to undergo penance and affirm his life, Ratan undergoes the sternest apprenticeship of its own quality in the world. And his next choice, in order to redeem himself - the grotesque business of shoe-shining. He starts from the very lowest by dusting the shoes of the congregation outside the temple every

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morning on his way to the office, all unknown to his wife, with his expensive Limousine waiting to take him to his office in the Government of India offices - is also his own.

He asks the silent listener, the N. C. C. cadet to consider him an apprentice and thinks that there is nothing wrong to have a second start and adds further:

Consider me an apprentice and you will perhaps understand. Each morning, before I go to work I come here. I sit on the steps of the temple and while they pray I wipe the shoes of the congregation. Then they are gone... I stand in the doorway. I never enter the temple, I am not concerned with what goes on in there. I stand at the doorstep and fold my hands smelling of leather and I say things. Be good, I tell myself. Be good. Be decent. Be of use. Then I beg forgiveness of a large host; my father, my mother, the Brigadier, the unknown dead of the war, of those whom I harmed, with deliberation and with cunning, of all those who have been the victims of my cleverness, those whom I could have helped and did not. (TA 142-43).

At this juncture Ratan realizes that life may well be zero but it is not necessarily purposeless. Ratan Rathor refers to one of his friends definition of zero, life as zero and his own amendment of the concept of zero;

Life is zero, he would say, and, he would add, you can take nothing away from a zero ... And it becomes negative when you take out of it your sense of shame, your honour. (TA 148)

Ratans distinction between zero and negative contains in it a subtle point of lifes philosophy. Moreover, Ratan gets aware of the need of a positive attitude to life. He affirms:

There is hope as long as there are young men willing to learn from the follies of their elders, willing to learn and ready to sacrifice. Willing to pay the price. (TA 149)

Ratan reaches his affirmation in his apprenticeship. He remembers what his father had told him, whatever you do touches someone somewhere.” (TA 143) The way which Ratan chooses for the purification of his soul meets the vision of *Bhakti* in *The Bhagavad-Gita*. His earlier atheistic attitude towards life has gone and Ratan comes to believe that only God can help him. Ratan, admires *The Bhagavad-Gita* that asks people “to do Karma relinquishing attachment,” and that “if a man wants to attain self-realization he should dedicate all actions to Him with his mind fixed on Him,” “surrendering all duties to Him and seeking

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refuge in Him alone.” He is sitting in front of a temple signifies his *Bhakti* (path of devotion) in which the devotee can appease his God just by praying to Him. The realization – “life runs on approximations” (TA 143) – that dawn upon the protagonist is a veritable treasure of human experience. His confession that “I am learning to be of use,” (TA 143) sums up the very essence of human life. Humility is a first step towards *Bhakti* (path of devotion) and by deciding to take up this unpleasant job at the temple doorstep, Ratan Rathor initiates, himself in the process of redemption through devotion.

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