



**SINDI OBEROI - FROM DETACHMENT TO INVOLVEMENT: PRESENTED BY
ARUN JOSHI**

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ABSTRACT

Arun Joshis maiden novel is *The Foreigner* (1968), “one of the most compelling existentialist works of Indian English Fiction” . The formative part of the novel develops in the background of the West, and the latter phase in India brings in acculturation at the end. Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist is an existentialist character, youngman, living in the later half of the twentieth century, who belongs to no country, no people and finds himself in the predicament of a foreigner wherever he goes – Kenya, Uganda, England, America and India.

KEYWORDS: *Detachment, Involvement*

INTRODUCTION:

Arun Joshis first novel *The Foreigner* epitomizes the main traits of his obsessive preoccupation as a creative artist. Its protagonist, Sindi Oberoi anticipates all his successors in that he shares with them an extremely sensitive and individualistic temperament. Sindi is an embodiment of cosmopolitanism.

SINDI OBEROI - THE PROTAGONIST

Sindi is an omniscient protagonist narrator. The novel is written from the protagonist-narrators point of view and describes his experiences, as a student of Mechanical Engineering in the American University in Boston and later as an employee at Mr. Khemkas Firm, a wealthy Industrialist in Delhi. As Harish Raizada points out, “The narrative follows flash-ahead and flash-back technique.” The narrative, even R. K. Dhawan writes, “keeps moving from the recent past in Boston to the present in Delhi.”

The fictional plot covers the locale of four continents – Africa, Europe, America and Asia. Sindi Oberoi is closely associated with all these geographical regions. Sindi presents himself as an uprooted young man living in the later half of the twentieth century who wants to arrive at some meaning of his life. Sindi is brought up by his uncle who settled in Kenya. He seems a foreigner to the world wherever he goes and at times even becomes a stranger to himself. Sindi is a child of mixed parentage, born of an English mother and a Kenyan-Indian father. Since both his parents died early in an air-crash near Cairo. Sindi has vague memories of his parents.

An Indian by origin, born and brought up in Kenya, Sindi receives his early education in London and goes to study engineering in America. This fluidity of his background emphasizes his alienation. Being orphaned at an early age of four he finds himself drifting aimlessly on the surface of life without any anchor to cling to. After his uncles death, Sindi feels unanchored and life becomes a purposeless existence to him. He seems to have no settled aim in life and gets, every now and then, nervous and ill at ease. Sindi is hardly Indian and this fact keeps on haunting him. He confesses: “Talking about myself always makes me ill at ease.” (TF 35)

In this way Sindis parentlessness has its manifold implications in the different facets of his life. He is a child to none. This loss of personal history, culture and national identity catapults Sindi, as it were into the role of a detached observer or narrator of the whole drama of existence. Sindi as a pessimistic narrator tells the story of June, Babu, Shiela, Khemka, Muthu, Karl, Anna, Kathy, Judy, etc. Though his own life interferes in the story, he relates his experiences in a stream of consciousness manner. Thus, Sindi Oberoi is totally isolated from the whole set-up of society. Sindi believes that man is just a toy in the hands of time and life is full of agony and pain.

At the same time Sindi indulges himself with Anna and is seduced by her, who is a middle-aged woman of “thirty five with dark hair and finely chiseled features.” (TF 176) She is “a minor artist who had separated from her husband.” (TF 142) He has a love affair with her and comes to know after some time that “Anna was not yearning for me or anybody, but for her lost youth.”

Later on, Sindi gets involved with Kathy and enjoys sex with her but she also leaves him because she is a married woman and thinks that “marriage was sacred and had to be

maintained at all costs.” (TF 144) After her return to her husband, Sindi comes to experience the same with Judy and Christine but these transitory pleasures leave him unsatisfied and agonized. Sindi even uses the image of the labyrinth while talking about his sad affair with Kathy.

Sindi believes that he should take lessons from his past and try to remain uninvolved as much as possible. Even living in America, he is fed up with his life and his routine. Sindi's bright career prospects and enviable academic achievements are of no avail because from all sides, he is overwhelmed by a nagging sense of loneliness and the chaos of his being. He is painfully aware of his miserable past. He fails to see any purpose of his existence. He wants to justify his existence by taking recourse to philosophies when he discusses his problems with the Catholic priest but fails.

In his life, Sindi comes in contact with three persons intimately. His first exposure to relationship is with June Blyth, who lives with her mother in Boston. June Blyth is beautiful, sensual, benign, affectionate girl who meets Sindi at a foreign students party. June loves Sindi deeply but this love is not sincerely reciprocated by Sindi. He, on the other hand, is confused and afraid of human relationships, because they eventually give pain and suffering. June Blyth, points out to Sindi of his being obsessed with the foreign complex and a “queer person” (TF 34) who enjoys being with others. In this way Sindi proves himself to be somewhat different from the common run of the people. The fallacy of his detachment is a mask to cover his inability to belong to people and have a proper understanding of them.

Psychologically speaking, a person so alienated and isolated as Sindi is bound to be cynical and frustrated. His flat-mate Karl once says to him, “I didnt know you could laugh too,” (TF 77) to which Sindi replies: “I can if I am drunk enough.” (TF 77) Sheila (Babus sister) once tells Sindi: “You are the saddest man I have ever known,” (TF 148) Sindi himself confesses: “I was cynical and exhausted, grown old before my time, weary with my own loneliness.” (TF 161) Mr. Khemka (Babusfather) is not far wrong when he tells Sindi that he is, “Living, but as bad as dead.” (TF 145) Junes mother, Mrs. Blyth, calls Sindi: “You are just cynic, my boy.” (TF 108) On this, Sindi feelingly expresses a peculiar sense of parentlessness. Sindi is critical of the ultra-modern mechanized society in which he is “considered quite a misfit.” (TF 15).

Sindi has a purely detached business-like attitude towards life and people. Sitting expressionless, he wants to watch the world go by. Thus, Sindi is a psychic case. His loneliness is apparent to anyone who meets and talks to him. In America, June remarks about his foreignness and in India Sheila points out, “You are still a foreigner. You dont belong here.” (TF 149) Sindis case clearly meets the alienated state of life. At this juncture he has no faith in religion. To Sindi it appears as if the world is devoid of God. When June asks him if he believes in God, Sindi finds himself in a dilemma and shows himself skeptical about the existence of God. As he wanders about aimlessly and a policeman, towards the close of the novel, asks him: “Are you looking for something, Sir?” he replies, “Yes - Have you seen God?” (TF 221) In fact, he entertains a deep sense of insecurity, unreality and impermanence about things.

First of all Sindi doesnt love himself sufficiently well to love others. He cannot love himself because he suffers from a self-defeating sense of insecurity. His defenses not only disallow him to love others but also be loved by others as he himself confesses: “I was not the kind of man one could love; I had learnt that long ago.” (TF 34).

Sindi is trapped in his own loneliness, which is accentuated by his withdrawal from the society around him. At this juncture Sindis problem is the problem of existence, seeking fulfillment in terms of human relationships. Sindi had never learnt to take things seriously. His casualty therefore forces him to deny the reality and permanence of things in life. This attitude develops in him a fear of involvement, which can be observed from his ruminations: “I dont want to get involved, I repeated to myself. Everywhere I turned I saw involvement” . (TF 62-63).

When June calls Sindi and informs him that, “I will not be able to see you anywhere, ...Babu and I are getting married soon. (TF 111) When he puts down the receiver, he presses his face hard against the metal of the telephone and cries. “The edge of pain was so intense that it left me completely numb.” (TF 123) At this point he behaves like a typical lover. It is strange that though Sindi is not willing to marry June, he is deeply depressed and agonized when she is separated from him. He busies himself with his work at college but June remains in his thoughts. Even now and then he finds himself in places where he had been with June. Junes separation from him makes him realize that she had become a part of him. Still he cherishes the hope that June may return to him.

Sindi has had many relationships, but whenever there is a question of marriage, he has tried to be excused on the pretext of remaining detached. Meenakshi Mukherji describes Sindi as “a perennial outsider.” He feels always being pushed “on the gaint wheel, going round and round, waiting for the fall.” (TF 75) To get rid of his past Sindi tries hard to involve himself in some work but is far from getting it. His professor finds him lost and offers him a teaching assignment but he opts for a job in New York for an assignment, where Sindi with his team designs “a machine that will throw twenty thousand people out of work and make them feel so small that they would go home dead drunk.” (TF 175) Sindi is fed up with “the randomness of existence.” (TF 175) The “pathlessness” of the road to New York reminds Sindi of his own pathlessness. Fully convinced the meaninglessness of the world, Sindi even contemplates suicide. Sindi feels he does not fit in the world and his way of life seems confused.

Sindi thinks he is responsible for Babus death and out of his despair, he feels that he cannot stay any longer in America and decides to leave, but the worse is yet to follow. As he is waiting for the necessary Visa papers in New York, he receives a letter from June telling him that she is carrying Babus child in her womb. She further requests him to come over to Boston. He finds himself in a dilemma as he cannot leave New York next few days. And when he visits Junes house he finds it locked. He is told by her neighbour that “June had died after an abortion and that her mother had gone away from the house.” (TF 162) The death of June leaves Sindi desperate and he is left musing on his so-called creed of non-involvement.

In his inner crisis Sindi finds the past haunting him like a ghost. The tragedy with Babu and later on with June is all due to Sindis wrong notion of detachment. With such a peculiar cast of minds, he is drawn towards a series of women though it is only with June that he is brought face to face with his hypocrisy, cowardice, vanity and stupidity. He enjoys making love to June as it feeds his vanity to know that there is someone who finds him worthy of love.

Junes tragic death acts as a tragic peripeteia. It brings a sudden realization in Sindi and he realizes: “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.” (TF 162) Though

this revelation has come to him somewhat late but the lesson he has got from all this is of utmost significance.

With a view to trying his luck elsewhere, he leaves for London. Even there he does not fit in. He feels the same tiresomeness and exhaustion. Sindi Oberoi is fed up with “the randomness of existence” (*TF* 195) and does not accept the offer of a job at the M.I.T. He wants to go back to Nigeria or India which also is decided by “the flip of a coin.” (*TF* 186) Head for Nigeria, I said. The coin showed tails, New Delhi. (*Ibid*) It is this which changes the course of his life and he comes first to New Delhi, the land from where his forefathers had settled in Kenya. Depending as much on luck, Sindi happens to come to India.

In India, he goes to meet Babus father and sister in Delhi. Khemkas come to know about Sindi through Babus letters and it was he who cabled them the news of Babus death in car-crash. Mr. Khemka asks him which kind of job he is searching but replies nothing, so Mr. Khemka appoints Sindi as his personal assistant to help him in all his activities and he accepts the offer. For Sindi, all the roads lead to alienation. But he forgets that roots are like fortifications in ones self and they may destroy one in the process of disowning them.

After working with the Khemkas for some time, Sindi feels disenchanting by the mode of life and set of values which Khemka and his friends follow and treats this atmosphere as a more vile version of life which he had already experienced in America. Now onwards he behaves in a more confident way with Mr. Khemka and Shiela. Sindi had sympathized with the labourers and indicted Mr. Khemka for exploiting his workers.

The poverty, the deprivation and the helplessness of the workers make Sindi take cudgels for them. He is shocked to find the employees in mortal dread of Sheila and Mr. Khemka. The workers cringe before them as if the two were malevolent spirits whose curse could be all-consuming. Sindi feels pained at mans exploitation of man, and denial of rights to people in spite of declared democratic and socialistic polity.

It is this openness of Sindis self that the Khemkas fail to appreciate and shocked by Sindis indifference towards the commercial prospects. Sindi is not ready to lose his soul as do the Khemkas in the frenzied pursuit of affluence. Sindis long journey - Kenya - London - Boston - Delhi - is structured around his central concern for the affirmation of life and his employment with the Khemkas turns out to be an infinitely rewarding experience.

In the morning after an income tax raid Mr. Khemka was arrested. Mr. Khemka tries to influence Sindi with money to accept the blame upon himself and save him from the

disgrace of arrest and imprisonment, Sindi feels so much shocked that he decides to move away from Khemkas world and even to leave Delhi. Sindi feels utterly disgusted at the modus operandi of Mr. Khemka and his tribe who exploits needy people like Jain and Muthu the employees in Mr. Khemkas office, so that their empire could grow. It is for this that Sindi becomes reluctant to pay for the sins of Mr. Khemka.

There were rumours of Khemkas firm being bought over by some other greedy sharks. Muthu and the staff requests Sindi to take over the office so that the poor workers of the factory are not ousted from job. Even Sheila pleaded him to own up her fathers crimes as his own, on this Sindi says: “I suspected they kept two books like Mr. Khemka - one for their neighbours, the other for God,” (TF 209) another type like this Sindi witnesses, is the counsel-general for India who interviewed him for granting him visa.

Sindi, having finished his packing late in the evening, goes to the station to reserve a seat for Bombay. During the night, the temperature suddenly drops and by dawn it starts raining. “It was the first of the monsoons, carrying a freshness and coolness that was a welcome change from the humid heat of the previous day.” (TF 185) The clear sky symbolizes the stirring of life in Sindi and the light of knowledge that will dawn upon Sindi. It is his reawakening, his rebirth, his regeneration. That afternoon, when the sky is clear, Sindi goes to meet Muthu. He is shocked to his very depths when Muthu gives an expression to the misery of his life: “It becomes difficult to remain calm when you find so many children going hungry most of the time... I wouldnt worry so much if I could at least be sure of food for these people.” (TF 225).

Sindi is deeply touched by the squalor of the place and the wretchedness of Muthus lot. The heroic struggle of Muthu to provide food to his own family and the family of his brother, who is unemployed, reveals to Sindi the real meaning of life which one finds in developing sympathetic understanding with other persons and responding to them warmly. Muthu, an almost illiterate labourer, teaches Sindi Oberoi, a Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering from the U.S.A., the sharp distinction between detachment and involvement: “Sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved” (TF 188).

Muthu and his problems bring about a major change in Sindis attitude towards life. Muthus human suffering personified for him with a daughter in her frock much “dirty and too large” (TF 184) for her and with a wife suffering from tuberculosis that rather “gets

bad in that weather of rains.” (TF 184) Gradually, he develops empathy even for other labourers working for Mr. Khemka. At Muthus request, he takes over the management of Mr. Khemkas business but works in a detached manner, as he says: “The fruit of it was really not my concern.” (TF 242) He becomes more or less, a *Sthitaprajna*, abandoning attachment whatsoever as per Lord Krishnas preaching in *The Bhagavad Gita*: “Yogasthah kuru karmani sangam, Tyaktva Dhananjaya, Siddhyasiddhyoh samo Bhutva samatvam yoga uchyate” . That is, Arjuna perform your duties dwelling in yoga, relinquish attachment, and indifferent to success and failure; equanimity is called yoga.

All of a sudden Sindi cancels his visit to Bombay to take up a new assignment and unpacks his things and puts them “back as neatly as possible in their old places” (TF 189) and reviews his past in these words: “Before I went to sleep that night I took a general stock of myself. In many ways the past had been a waste, but it had not been without its lessons. I had started adult life as a confused adolescent, engrossed with myself, searching for the wisdom and peace that comes with it. The journey had been long and still was not over (TF 185).

CONCLUSION:

In the last Sindi decides to hold the reins of Khemkas business due to sympathy for the poor employees who face their removal from service. The cynical Sindi changes into a purposeful man. It is here that he “belongs.” (TF 190) It is at this critical juncture that we find Sindi on his way to becoming wiser. Given his past track record, it shows Sindis stubbornness to meet life on his terms. He plunges himself into the battle of survival which the workers of the factory could not have won without his help, co-operation and guidance.

Deeply aware of this new orientation in his way of life which leads him to affirmation, Sindi gives a new orientation to his name too and instead of Sureendra or Surinder he calls himself *Surrender Oberoi*. (TF 191) Thus, Sindi becomes a typical existential hero, the haunted anguished creature who is absolutely alone and free, creating himself a personal way of life out of the void of nothingness all round him. He has the competence to modify himself and, thus saves himself from the doom.

Sindi finds relief from his agony when he comes to India and is satisfied with his involvement in the right action. India makes him shift the attachment from the self to the world. Sindi intuitively realizes the operation of the law of *Karma* because he finds that the

seemingly separate experiences of life are related to form the patterns of his life. His faith in the law of *Karma* is affirmed in his thought that “we think we leave our actions behind but the past is never dead. Time has a way of exacting its toll and the more you try to hold, the heavier the toll is” (TF 181).

The journey from the West to East symbolizes Sindi's spiritual quest. Sindi's long and circuitous journey helps him recognize the meaning and purpose of life. Muthu for him becomes the most appropriate example of the ideal man - the man of steady wisdom. Muthu is really a *Kramayogi*. It is from him that Sindi learns the secret of life and now Sindi begins to move on constructive lines, the path of non-attached action of Nishkam-Karma of Karmayoga as propounded in *The Gita*. In *The Bhagavad-Gita*, the Blessed Lord says: “Tasmad asaktah satatam karyam karma samachara asakto hy, Acaran karma param apnoti purusha” . Therefore, without attachment, perform always the work that has to be done, for man attains to the highest by doing work without attachment. Sindi comes to realize the change in the concept of “detachment.” (TF 180) A new man, who is more humane and merciful, is being born within him.

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