



A STUDY OF ARUN JOSHI'S: '*THE FOREIGNER*'

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Abstract

Arun Joshi, an internationally renowned novelist, has added an outstanding contribution in the hierarchy of Indian English novels. His '*The Foreigner*' is a superb work of art which presents the modern man's existing predicament in which he is bound or compelled to remain. The modern man is haunted by the sense of rootlessness, alienation and the problems of existence. Sindi Oberoi, the hero of the novel, is the son of a Kenyan – Indian father and English mother. Being bereaved of the love of his parents in his childhood, Sindi always feels sense of alienation and rootlessness. In the course of his study he goes to England and then to America. And in England and in America he develops affairs with women and girl like June Blyth but his sense of alienation and detachment remains the same. When he comes to India and joins the company of Mr. Khemka, a selfish Indian business man. After a year there arises a difference between Mr. Khemka and Sindi, consequently Sindi takes stern decision to leave his company which has already reached at the verge of collapse. The workers of the company request Sindi to run the sinking company for the survival. Setting aside his personal interest and problems Sindi for the first time in his life feels the problems of the others through his own heart and accepts the proposal to manage the company. Thus it is quite genuine to say that Sindi's journey of life begins from individuality and reaches at the platform of humanity.

Keywords:- Rootlessness, Alienation, Individuality, Humanity.

Arun Joshi, an internationally renowned and surprisingly attracting the attention of the readers for his brilliant techniques and thematic richness, is a highly talented Indian English novelist who has written five novels and a few short stories covering almost all important aspects of human life. His first novel '*The Foreigner*' deals with multidimensional themes of alienation, rootlessness of existence and the sense of detachment. Joshi's second novel

'*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*' artistically presents the glimpse of two societies – civilized one and the primitivism containing tribal society where every relation is natural and genuine, standing in sharp contrast with the so – called modern civilized society laden with artificiality. And the third novel of Joshi '*The Apprentice*' portrays the life – like pictures of the pre – independent India and the post – independent India with minutest details of corruption prevailed from top to bottom which seem to swallow the very identity, integrity and even the existence of the country. '*The Last Labyrinth*' of Joshi is a perfect portrayal of the modern man engrossed in material gain and seeking sensual pleasure all around but still unsatisfied and reaching at the verge of suicidal act. And the last novel '*The City and The River*' presents the glimpse of the government machinery working for self interest which at last causes havoc and complete ruin. The novel also presents the symbolic meaning of creation and destruction which is cosmic rule and reality. For his outstanding contribution to Indian English novel Joshi was conferred India's highest literary award – The SahityaAkademi Award in 1981.

Joshi is rightly regarded as the epoch – making figure in the history of Indian English Novel and his two novels particularly '*The Last Labyrinth*' and '*The Foreigner*' are superb works of art. Khushwant Singh holds his views on '*The Last Labyrinth*' "Here is an eternally contemporary theme with all its complexities: The story's spiritual and sensuous dimensions are interwoven with great finesse making this novel a rare, unforgettable treat. The story is beautifully written ... holds the reader's undivided attention to the finish." And regarding '*The Foreigner*' The Journal of Indian writing in English expresses its opinion " '*The Foreigner*' is not only a novel with a fine artistic vision rendering the subtle complexities of attitudes and the emotions in a language which has verve, ease and suppleness, ... (but) marks a definite improvement over all other novels in English on the East – West muddle."

Almost all the modern writers are more or less influenced by the existentialist philosophers like Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. Some writers may not accept it clearly but the popularly known theories of existentialism have brought a tremendous change on the mind – set of the modern Indian English writers. Arun Joshi frankly admits in his interview to Purabi Bannerji:

"I did read Camus and Sartre. I liked '*The Plague*' and read '*The Outsider*'. I might have been influenced by Sartre I did not understand clearly or like. As for existential philosopher like Kierkegaard I never understand anything except odd statements."

The influences of the existentialist writers like Sartre and Camus can be easily traced in the novels of Joshi, particularly '*The Foreigner*'. Sindi Oberoi, the hero of '*The Foreigner*' stands in resonance with Camu's Meursault who is a foreigner or an outsider. The very title '*The Foreigner*' is suggestive to the theme of the novel. Sindi Oberoi is always haunted by the sense of alienation, rootlessness and detachment. Since he is the son of a Kenyan Indian and English mother and bereaved of his parents' love even in his childhood due to their accidental death in air crash, he inwardly suffers terribly. Wherever Sindi goes he is

shadowed by sense of alienation, detachment and foreignness which his beloved June Blyth too observes:

“There is something strange about you, you know something distant. I’d guess that when people are with you they don’t feel like they’re with a human being. May be it’s an Indian characteristic, but I have a feeling you’d be foreigner anywhere.”

Joshi’s *‘The Foreigner’* is a brilliant portrayal of the modern civilized society all over the world in general and particular in India in which man suffers the problems of individual identity, alienation, rootlessness and growing sense of insecurity which Shankar Kumar holds as:

“The problem of individual identity has a complexity in its different manifestations. Psychologists and philosophers have all discussed the predicament of modern life and man and found in both traits of deep – rooted anxiety, alienation and absurdity.”

We find that Sindi Oberoi too is one of such persons whose personal problems have turned them selfish and inhuman inwardly. Sindi is a self – centred man who always remains engrossed in his own problems of the sense of alienation and loss of identity but for others he is a hard nut to crack. Sindi never remains in state of peace and satisfaction. An unknown hopeless drift and fear haunt his mind. He adopts several jobs to earn his living during his study periods. His travels from Nairobi to London and then to Boston remain fruitless in providing him peace of mind. He works in different capacities such as the job of dish washing, barman and library assistant. In the company of a catholic priest in Scotland he prefers his interest to God, religion and mysticism but it too does not provide him mental peace and solace.

Sindi is not an exception to such mental agony and turmoil rather almost the whole human race is agonized in modern human situation. The loss of human values has created such conditioning that every man feels as an island. The instinct to help others has disappeared from the society of any race or culture or nation. Perhaps the cause of this devastating condition and working is the lack of social responsibility which has been fatal for all. There is heavy competition in the whole human race. The urge for becoming has created a sense of selfishness in every man. Every man wants others to push back and run ahead. Sense of jealousy has prevailed in the modern man. So from birth to death life has been a constant battle and strife and made life absurd. As Camus said in *‘The Myth of Sisyphus’* (1942).

“In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. He is an irremediable exile... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity.”

Joshi feels the pangs of man inwardly and he seems to impart a new vision of life. For this purpose he portrays the condition of man in this rotten situation of hatred, jealousy, selfishness and urge for becoming and then after showing the consequences of it he seems to impart a new way of life that is to help others in need and to have sense of social

responsibility. Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist of the novel, has been projected by the novelist very carefully. What Sindi is in the beginning of the novel is not at the end rather a fundamental change has occurred in him. Self isolated Sindi turns to be socially aware of his sense of responsibility to others and this is perhaps outcome of his suffering.

Sindi Oberoi, the omniscient narrator protagonist, handles his narrative with great care and sincerity. The plot – construction of the novel covers the locale of four continents Africa, Europe, Asia and America. As Sindi is born of the parents of mixed cultures and during the period of his rearing and education he travels from Nairobi to London, from London to America and then to India, he treats himself as rootless and multi cultured man. This feeling of rootless creates severe mental agony and grief at the psychological level. And he thinks that he belongs to no culture – neither Indian nor Kenyan. Sindi goes on flirting with the English ladies and American girls, but his sense of alienation and rootlessness remains as usual.

Since the novel has been written in flashback technique, scenes shift from London to America, from America to India and further from India to America. And when the novel opens the scene is of Baburao Khemka's corpse in Boston. Sindi becomes puzzled to see the half – mutilated face of Babu. Sindi's state of mind is a blending of fear and happiness because it was Babu whose affair with June Blyth made her slip out of Sindi's reach. Babu had been a rival in Sindi's love affair with June and the very death of Babu rendered happiness in the unconscious mind of Sindi. Sindi might be looking worried at the accidental death of Babu but his inner self enjoyed it which Sindi himself reveals.

“I did look strange. The whole thing had left me baffled. All along I had acted out of lust and greed and selfishness, and they had applauded my wisdom. When I had sought only detachment. I had driven a man to his death.”

By projecting the inner self of the protagonist Joshi has successfully portrayed the moral and ethical decadence of the modern man which is a threat to the future life of the whole generation. This is the existing human predicament where humanity has got punctured out of man.

Completely dejected, alienated and swinging in the pangs of rootlessness Sindi faces Asthmatic attack in which June functions for him like medicine by providing sweet words and nourishment. It cures Sindi temporarily and he feels complete relaxed. And he wonders what had made him soothed – whether the medicine or June's loving care that he expresses:

“Just before I went to sleep I wondered what had soothed me – the capsules or June.”

As Sindi is fed up with his life and frequently thinks over his death and he expresses the futility of life. He always remains alienated from himself which he expresses:

“It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner. My foreignness lay within me and I couldn’t leave myself behind wherever I went.”

But growing intimacy with June begins to melt the stony and harsh feelings in Sindi which is revealed by him:

“I don’t know how long her dance lasted. Five minutes or ten minutes or half an hour. In those brief minutes she revealed to me all that I was not and couldn’t hope to be. May be that is why I later fall in love with her even as I struggled to remain uninvolved.”

Though Sindi and June love each other and they perform sexual acts yet Sindi tries to remain uninvolved and unattached in principle. And after June’s proposal to marry her, Sindi refuses and remains sticking to his concept of unattachment. Consequently, June seeks her love in BaburaoKhemka. Babu’s love and sense of surrender to June grows day by day which creates a gap between Sindi and June. When Babu gets acquired with the affairs between June and Sindi he collides his car on a river bridge and dies. Babu’s death does not make shocking effects on Sindi rather he becomes inwardly happy due to his jealous instinct to Babu regarding the affair with June. Sindi’s sense of rootlessness and alienation has made him heartless and self – centred which he confesses to himself while expressing his sense of deep shock in presence of June just after the death of Babu.

“I might not have willed it consciously but in some foggy chamber of my being I must have waited for it to happen.”

We notice how Sindi’s personality is extremely intricate which is very difficult to understand. In this regard he himself fails to understand the labyrinth of his unconscious mind which can be analysed at the psychological level. Being fed up with the sense of rootlessness and alienation he might look or declare to carry out the concept of unattachment, but in actuality he is furiously attached to the sense of sensuality and biological urges which may not be apparent at the layers of his conscious self but it howls in his oceanic depth of unconscious mind. This is why that Sindi unconsciously waits for Babu’s death.

Apart from SindiOberoi there are several other characters who represent the people of his kind. BaburaoKhemka’s father Mr. Khemka is a big businessman of Delhi who is the owner of a factory. He is a businessman committing all kinds of forgery for saving taxes as much as he can. He himself and his daughter Sheila has created the air of fear among their workers of the company.

“What puzzled me from the beginning about Mr. Khemka’s office was the mortal dread in which he and his daughter were held by the employees. The workers cringed before them as if the man and his daughter were malevolent spirits whose curse could be all consuming.”

Mr. Khemka is an Indian businessman who has the sole aim of getting money by fair or foul means. He loves his only son BaburaoKhemka heart and soul, but not as a son to have developed his own personality and individuality as a free man, rather he treats him as a factory to earn much money which Sindi observes and expresses:

“Babu was his son. He loved him, yes he did. But not as a son. Your father loved him like a factory. Babu was a pawn in your father’s hands with no will or life of his own.”

Mr. Khemka is obsessed with earning money even by making fraud in paying income tax which results as his imprisonment and the factory reaches at the verge of shut down. Misappropriation of income tax has been the common cult of the Indian businessmen which Joshi has brought to light. Joshi has revealed another dark side of Mr. Khemka’s personality which is extremely fatal for smooth social structure. He pays low wages to the workers engaged in his factory and he has developed such a whimsical approach that he bullies anyone around him. This habit and bullying mentality of Mr. Khemka has brought chaos in his own family. His only son BaburaoKhemka had been prey to his despotic nature. Babu could not develop his own personality as a free man of his own instincts, hopes and desires. He was a puppet in the hands of his father. It is Mr. Khemka who decides his (Babu’s) choice of study even if he does not succeed in it. As long as Babu remained alive he had to follow blindly the commands of his father, Mr.Khemka.

When Babu went to America for higher study, there too he had to follow the commands of his father from Delhi. Babu was so restrained by his father that he could not develop his own decisive capacity consequently even for a small decision he had to depend either on his friend Sindi or his beloved American girl June Blyth. This is why that in state of his perpetual tension about his bad performance at study and regarding the affair with June he could not take right decision as what to do and he committed suicidal andact.

We notice how another very dark side of Mr. Khemka’s personality is this that he had nourished the illusion that he could do anything with the help of money and his influence and he would be committing all foul acts against government without being caught. The very sealing of the account books and other articles by the income tax authorities created a big setback on the minds of Mr. Khemka, but even then he cannot remove from his mind the impact of influences which is revealed in the hot discussion with SindiOberoi. Mr. Khemka blames Sindi for sealing of the company. He thinks that had Sindi bribed the authorities the act of sealing could not have happened. But Sindi says that the income tax people were in search for proper time to get Mr. Khemka in their trap:

“But don’t you see they are out to get you? They have been working on you for more than a year now.”

And then Mr. Khemka boasts about his influence:

“You don’t know the influence of my contacts. They could have got us out of any difficulty.”

We notice how Joshi has revealed the businessmen’s instinct of the misappropriation of income tax which is a crime against the government and public both. And they swell their treasure even by paying very low wages to the workers. In this country the situation is such that majority of people have been facing the problems of existence. Every man has been selfish under the existing social fabric.

The novelist seems to impart a new vision of life in order to restore the social harmony, peace and ease. This is why that he makes his hero change the motto of life. Sindi Oberoi, who was living in the pangs of detachment, alienation and rootlessness, now changes his thought and action and leaving behind his own likings and disliking begins to work for the betterment of co – workers. Though Sindi has been ordered by Mr. Khemka to leave his company forever and he has already got a job in Bombay, yet he surrenders before Khemka on the requests of the workers working in Mr. Khemka’s company.

Muttu, one of the workers of Khemka’s company, expresses his opinion of attachment and detachment while talking to Sindi. As Sindi has taken decision not to get involved in the affairs of Khemka’s company, Muttu explains the real meanings of detachment which suits to Sindi:

“But it is not involvement sir,” he said. “Sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved. He spoke quietly, but his voice was firm with conviction.”

Sindi Oberoi struggling had to solve the problems of identity crisis, rootlessness and meaninglessness of human life could not find a proper answer to these questions and he remained caged in his individual pursuits. But a single sentence of Muttu shook the whole being of Sindi and his micro circle of individuality got splitted and his conscious being entered the arena of larger humanity. And he, setting aside his own problems, got involved to solve the problems of the mass which hesays:

“As I entered the room I had a strange sensation something I had never before felt in life. I felt as if I had been dropped on a sinking ship and charged with the impossible task of taking it ashore.”

Sindi seems to be influenced with the philosophy of Bhagwad Gita in which Lord Krishna makes Arjun understand the real meaning of Karma and detachment. Shankar Kumar holds the similar views regarding the change that occurred in Sindi:

“Thus at last he is able to emerge out of the crisis of the identity and gets a new motivation on his being aware of the true meaning of life which he derives from the philosophy of the Bhagwad Gita.”

In this way it won't be unfair to say that Joshi's *'The Foreigner'* is a journey from Micro Individuality to Macro humanity. The novelist gladly accepts the western philosophy of absurdity which is a reality in the modern world, but he hopes for the cure of the prevailing absurdity and alienation. This is why Joshi's creation of Sindi who at last renders his service for the welfare of the mass is a ray of hope for coming out of the pangs of absurdity and alienation. Thus Joshi's *'The Foreigner'* provides a broad vision of life which shapes a new path for humanity.

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