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Balumuri Venkateswarlu
Guest Faculty, Department of
English, Acharya Nagarguna
University, Nagarjuna Nagar,
Guntur, Andhra Pradesh,
India

A study on existentialism in Arun Joshi's selected Novels

Balumuri Venkateswarlu

Abstract

This paper investigates the existentialism and alienation in the Arun Joshi's select works. Arun Joshi one of the most prominent Indo-English writers of Post-colonial Era of Indian Literary arena, has bequeathed one novels and a collection of scopes. Indeed, psychology has been used as a powerful instrument by Joshi to bring out the mental aberration suffered by most of his protagonists, but not more. Though his writings superficially resemble those of Western existentialist writers who harp on the futility and negation of life and existence divine, Joshi is deeply preoccupied with bringing out the essence of Indian ethos whose role is inevitable in all facets of life not only for the ancient ones, but also for the baffled contemporary youngster, whether he be Indian or alien.

Keywords: Existentialism, foreignness, alienation, negation existentialism, alienation, existence

Introduction

Indo-Anglican Literature or Indian English Literature has come a long way from being viewed patronizingly by the British to making occasional forays into the literary scene and being acknowledged as a popular genre of Modern English Literature. Arun Joshi is one of the Indo-English authors who gave the new direction the Indian fiction written in English. His novels are based on the rootless of the characters who is always in search for his identity it seems that his own experience of living abroad is portrayed in his novels in the form of various characters. In all his novels Joshi deals with the themes of alienation and involvement, east-west encounter and compromise love and hate, quest and complacency, and existentialism and materialism. His fictional world is revelation of a world where man is confronted by the self and the question of his existence. His novels are an attempt towards a better understanding of the world and of himself. He has been influenced by Albert Camus and other existentialist writers.

Arun Joshi is an Indian writer. Joshi's literary career began with the publication of *The Foreigner* (1968). The other novels of Arun Joshi are *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and the River* (1990). He has a collection of short stories too, *The Survivor* (1975). He won the prestigious Sahitya Academy award for his fourth novel *The Last Labyrinth* in 1982. In the contemporary scene of the Indo-English novel, Arun Joshi stands out as a highly significant novelist. He is conscientious writer who experiments with the medium of the novel as an expression of the existentialist predicament and dilemmas of his protagonists as they struggle to grapple with moments of acute spiritual crisis. Joshi emerges as a novelist not in the tradition of Jane Austen, Dickens, Anand, Narayan, Kamala Markandaya or Bhabani Bhattacharyya, but rather one in the line of decadence of Kafka, Camus, Sarte and Saul Bellow, Elison and Malamud. His main characters are in search of their lost self, their identity.

Arun Joshi, like the existential writers, is passionately concerned with man's feeling of alienation and anxiety in life but he differ from the western existential writers in the scene that in him the existentialist dilemma, the anguish of alienation and the absurdity of situation never remain the final predicament. He is also different from Indo English writers like Raja Rao or Sudhin Ghosh who hold up renunciation as the ideal mode of Indian life, and anchor their novels to some Indian philosophical system he does not accept alienation or absurdity as the contingent condition of human life.

Corresponding Author:
Balumuri Venkateswarlu
Guest Faculty, Department of
English, Acharya Nagarguna
University, Nagarjuna Nagar,
Guntur, Andhra Pradesh,
India

Instead of that his central motif is quest, and all his heroes are questers and seekers Joshi's presentation of the tormented and conflicting self of the contemporary man has added new dimension to the Indo-English novel.

His novels have a universal imperishable importance for their affirmative eloquent message for the humanity and therein lies his inimitable talent astounding originality his protagonists seriously search for meaning and definition of life through process of active experience generally leading to the realization that only love, compassion, sincerity, courage and fidelity to one's own self can counter-balance the sense of meaninglessness and sterility in modern life. Arun Joshi's constant faith in the possibility of positive affirmation sets him apart from some of the existentialists whose search for values always remains open ended. Despite his contribution of only five novels and a few stories to the Indo-English writing, Arun Joshi seems as a bright star in the galaxy of Indo-English novelist.

Identity Crisis in the Foreigner

Arun Joshi is indisputably one of the few front-ranking fictionists of today. He made his debut in Indian-English literature with his maiden novel *The Foreigner* (1968). It has been hailed as "one of the most compelling existential works of Indian English Fiction." (Bhatnagar) Arun Joshi has produced very compelling work in fiction. He has, in *The Foreigner*, very dexterously handled some thought provoking, grave issues like rootlessness, detachment, frustration, quest for better alternative, identity, crisis and selfrealization, highlighting our glorious culture heritage and imperishable moral values.

In view of Arun Joshi the world today has become very materialistic, so much so that the higher values of life seem to have gone to the background. In the present world, material considerations dominate man's life. *The Foreigner* reveals that this highly sophisticated dehumanized technology itself now produces some of our most vexatious problems. Today the human beings are not happy and contented. Life has today, become aimless sport to passions, social prejudice, and national antagonism. The urbanized environment stirs sharp emotion in each man sadness, hate, frustration, and utter dejection.

The Foreigner illustrates the traumatic influence of urbanization and industrialization on man. The protagonist of the novel, Sindi Oberoi is a restless and uprooted character in an incept and sordid world. *The Foreigner* is, the main, the study of an uprooted young man living in the latter-half of the twentieth century who looks out concernedly for mooring and a meaning in his randomly drifting life. Born of an English mother and an Indian father who died when Sindi was only four, he was brought up by his uncle in Kenya. He was educated in east Africa, London and America. Denied parental love, at such a tender age, Sindi does not feel any love or affection towards his parents. In *The Foreigner*, the story is told in a series of flashbacks with a clever ordering of past events to maximize suspense. Though the narrative includes Babu, an Indian student in America, June, a simple and passionate American girl, Mr. Khemka, a Delhi industrialist, the novel is in main the story of Sindi Oberoi - a rootless young man. The story is narrated from Sindi's point of view. The division of the novel orders the events, as the first part lights up the beginning of relationships, the second growth and decay, and the last, defeat and destruction.

Joshi exhibits the agony of loneliness in uncovering the psychological conflict in the character of Sindi Oberoi in his quest for meaning through a series of relationships. Impressed by the authenticity and insightful peering into agonized psyche, Meenakshi Mukherjee comments that *The Foreigner* is the first Indo - Anglian novel to deal with a genuine human predicament. Sindi as a student of Engineering at Boston meets June at a foreign students' gathering. She likes him but he fights hard with himself to escape another affair. Sindi's sense of detachment and rootlessness is evident when June asks him where he is from. Sindi's reaction to the question provides a clue to his alienation:

Everybody always asked me the same silly question. 'Where are you from?' as if it really mattered a great deal where I was from. (23)

The Foreigner relates the story of its narrator, who reflects helplessly on his meaningless past and is apprehensive of his equally meaningless future. He feels uprooted and lost like a 'foreigner anywhere' and endeavours all through his life not to get involved with anybody or anything until he at last gets to know what detachment actually means. Sindi believed in detachment from the world and its affairs which in his loneliness: "I had to admit to myself that I was a lonely man". (*The Foreigner*) His non-involvement, apathy, loneliness and strangeness make him distant and foreigner wherever he goes.

Sindi feels miserable because he holds himself indirectly responsible for the death of his beloved June and his friend Babu. In an attempt at selfrealization he now questions his own behaviour. I thought I was acting out of detachment but was it not merely a desire to prove that I still held the key to June's happiness. Sindi is moved to see Muthu, in his one-room tenement spend his nights with eleven people, one of them a tubercular for ten years. He ultimately believes that right meaning of detachment consisted in getting involved in the world, so that it may combat hypocrisy and exhibitionism. Finally Sindi accepts Muthu's suggestion to take charge of the factory. This sheds light on the message of disinterested involvement.

Sindi Oberoi's transcendence is clear in his detached and yet compassionate commitment to work in order to involve himself meaningfully in the community. He has towards the end found a heaven after the vigorous quest of meaning that has shaped his life and tormented his psyche. An outstanding novelist of human predicament, Arun Joshi is more emphatically concerned with modern man's traumas and agonies which have various manifestations in the form of rootlessness, loneliness, meaninglessness, self estrangement and anxiety. In his seminal novel *The Foreigner* Arun Joshi tries to explore the predicament of modern life due to Globalization and Modernization. Human virtues such as love, sympathy, and kindness have disappeared altogether. Material consideration dominates man's life. The result is that there is chaos and confusion in the life of the modern man. He finds himself lonely, frustrated, dejected and almost alienated in the absence of meaningful relations with his fellow beings.

The narrator protagonist Sindi presents himself an uprooted Youngman living in the latter half of the twentieth century. Devoid of the life -sustainable values and cultural anchorage, and being brought up in a loveless world, he

develops in him a deep sense of insecurity and unreality. He goes on hopping from one country to another to conquer pain and give his suffering soul solace. But he has been alien throughout his life right from the time in Kenya, London and Boston. He undergoes various changes and varied experiences. These experiences and the burden of broken relationships disturb him intensely. The result is that he cultivates a sense of detachment to overcome his sour experiences of the past. His detachment is the root cause of his traumas and agonies.

Ever since India came in contact with West, there has been the hybridization of races and cultures. This has also caused upheavals in Indian psyche. These amalgamated materials fail to make us identify ourselves either with one or with the other. As a result in the absence of meaningful relations modern man suffers from inner problems; a conviction of isolation, randomness and meaninglessness in his way of existence. He poses to be cosmopolitan in nature; but he is neither purely cosmopolitan nor aware of his roots.

Among the Post Independent Indo-Anglian novelists, Arun Joshi has exceptionally perspectives a creative artist and has successfully explored predicament of modern man in the absurd world. O.P. Bhatnagar points out:

“A certain awareness of man’s rootlessness and the consequential loneliness and anxiety is the keynote of Arun Joshi’s unique vision of the predicament of modern man in contemporary Indian English fiction.”(29)

In this modern era the sensitive man finds it difficult to adjust with the social environment. As a result he suffers from the problem of meaninglessness. It has been treated in considerable details in American and European literature. In India Arun Joshi’s approach to this problem adds a new dimension in English fiction. It is because of the between what he really is and what he would like to pretend. The result alienation some of the philosophers and thinkers have called the present age to be an age of alienation. Alienation is one of the agonizing experiences of modern man. He is doomed to suffer under the impact of human alienation which manifests itself in the form of generation gap, the compartmentalization of life, the stunting of personal development, the conspicuous absence of a sense of meaningfulness of life and so on.

In this novel an attempt has been made to explore the predicament of modern man in Arun Joshi’s maiden novel *The Foreigner* on the basis of the portrayal of characters and situations. The novel begins in Boston with a note of deep anguish where in the morgue Sindi identifies the dead body of Babu Rao Khemka, an engineering student who has died in a car accident, and informs June this unexpected happening. The further events are unfolded by Sindi Oberoi, the narrator protagonist using flash ahead and flash –back technique to unfold the incidents in the story. The novel is a story of Sindi’s struggle to seek a way out of the intricate labyrinth of life which he passes through. His mother was an English woman and fathers a Kenyan Indian. His parents died in an air crash in his infancy and their only reality for him is a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs. He lost both his parents at the age of four and hence the question of any country of his parents does not arise. Presumably his own sense of belonging either to his family or nation. This fluidity of his background emphasizes his alienation and his being a foreigner from birth.

Sindi is trapped in his own loneliness, which is accentuated by his withdrawal from the society around him. He wonders,

somebody had begotten me without a purpose and so far I had lived without a purpose, unless you could call the search for peace a purpose. Perhaps I felt like that because I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if I had in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter! It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner. “Devoid of purpose, life becomes an aimless existence to him and he feels he existed only for dying.”(Pandey)

Sindi believes that man is just a toy in the hands of time having nothing to do but wait till time decides the future. He has a very successful academic career at London University, at Boston where he takes Doctorate in Mechanical Engineering. But he cares for mechanical engineering a bit more than any other subject. During his stay of six years in America, he falls in love with June. His relationship with June fails to rid him of his sadness and detachment. He realizes love that wanted to possess was more painful than no love at all. Hence he develops philosophy of life that one should be able to detach oneself from the object of one’s love. He believes that he is incapable of getting married and marriage is not solution for one’s alienation.

Sindi comes to the final crisis in his life when he refuses to marry June. In the meanwhile Baburao Khemka is attracted to June and wants to marry her. June is a humane, sympathetic and sacrificial girl. She cares for her fellow beings, shares their griefs and consoles them. After Sindi’s refusal for marriage, June decides to Babu who needs her. He is an overprotected son of a Delhi tycoon. He has been brought up under his father’s strict supervision. Like Sindi, Babu too has experienced a lost childhood because there is no reference about his mother. Devoid of the love of one of the parents, being brought up under strict supervision of his father, his inner urge has been suppressed. It is for this reasons that in U.S.A he enjoys unfettered freedom. He thinks, It is a wonderful country. “I would never go back to India if I had the choice.”(khaurana)

Despite his father’s unwillingness, Babu and June are betrothed and this comes as a blow to Sindi. The edge of pain is so intense that it leaves him completely number. He is totally helpless because he has himself allowed this to happen. He has had many relationships, but wherever there is a question of marriage, he has tried to be excused on the ground of his own philosophy of detachment. He does not realize that a man who avoids his duties has nothing in store but pain. He cherishes the hope that June may return to him. So when June makes advances to Sindi one night in his apartment, he yields to her. Later June drives to Babu’s flat where both of them quarrel and she admits to Babu that she has been sleeping with Sindi. Babu, due to his Indian mental makeup fails to accept the American standards of conduct between the betrothed lovers. In a fit of anger he drives off his car blindly and is killed in the car accident.

Both June and Sindi realize that Babu has committed suicide. Babu has been sent out of his college as he had failed in exams. He had been disowned by his father for intending to marry June. On the top of it all comes June’s confession of her relations with Sindi which ultimately prods him to put an end of life. Sindi’s attitude of detachment turns out to be his mental trauma, aggrandizing itself with the death of Babu. He is rendered more and more isolated and exposed.

He hopes to meet individuals and a better place for living meaningful life. But in absence of any basic and life - sustainable values he is not able to cultivate the culture or

even become a part of it. After the death of Babu, Sindi accepts a job in New York. One day he comes to know through a letter from June that she is carrying Babu's child. Sindi thinks a lot on this matter and decides to marry June but when he reaches there he finds June dead during an attempt of abortion. He realizes his blunder through these bitter experiences of losing two dear ones of his- Babu and June.

"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. The gods had set a heavy prize to teach me just that." (Prasad)

Sindi learns to be detached from everything except himself due to his sour experiences with Anna and Kathy. But June's death finally breaks his attachment to himself. He realizes his worthless life at the bare age of twenty five when normally a young man is full of enthusiasm, energy and zest for life. He gives expression to his feeling thus twenty five years largely wasted in search of wrong things in wrong places. Twenty-five years gone in search of peace. Sindi has nothing positive to say about his journey from Kenya to Boston in search of meaningful life. He regrets that he has spent all this time uselessly.

Sindi's suffering soul knows no reason of life, no system, no society, no customs, no tradition and this is what pinches his soul. Life seems to be so meaningless to him that he does not have reason to live. He does not fit in the world and his way of life seems confused and explains in his state as cynical and exhausted grown old before his time, weary with my own loneliness. It is due to this fact that all his decisions and resolutions are initiated by his cynical temper. Sindi's sufferings are manifestations of a spiritual crisis which all sensitive and uprooted persons have to face in life. He wants peace, a capacity to love and the courage to live without desire and attachment. His main intention is to conquer pain and death which wipes out everything leaving only a big mocking zero. His various experiences in life however leave him with unanswered questions just like a fish out of water.

Conclusion

Arun Joshi gives the impression of a man who fights against the hypocrisy, violence and greed of the people and in the process alienates himself. The title becomes symbolic as the hero of the novel feels 'Foreigners' throughout his life. The truth is that detachment lies in the actually getting involved is quite appropriate with the hero. The novel is existential as it is about an individual's quest for self, his loneliness and feeling of pain and unhappiness which is the result of his estrangement from the world and other social values. Arun Joshi is used the image of alienation as a myth and the protagonist plays as an alien to the world. Chapter first deals with the concept of identity crisis which is not quite new in the modern world it has been in use in the theological, philosophical, sociological and psychological writings for an extensive while. Alienation means withdrawal, a person removes himself from contact with other people and is alone with his own thoughts. Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner* has been always lonely and effortlessness in the world of identity crisis to find a meaning in existence. His dilemma is sociopsychological, deprived of familial nourishment, cultural roots and affection in his very roots.

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