

## ROOTLESSNESS AND ALIENATION IN THE NOVELS OF ARUN JOSHI

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**ABSTRACT:** *In his fiction Arun Joshi tries to show the predicament of the modern man, who is confronted by the self and question of his existence. The man fails to understand the very purpose of his life in the hostile world. The impact of modernization and industrialization generate tension and leads to meaninglessness of life. "The existential status of disappointment, isolation and meaninglessness are the unfortunate spiritual predicament of modern man. He is a helpless individual surrounded by the hostile universe. He shows that the self – alienation has worse effects on an individual than social alienation.*

**Key Words:** *Rootlessness, Alienation, Existentialism, Predicament, meaninglessness*

Arun Joshi (1939-1993) was educated in India and in U.S.A. He first came into prominence as a novelist with the *Foreigner* (1968) and soon came to be recognized as an author of rare sensitivity and exceptional talent. He evolved a style and thematic approach uniquely his own and was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1982. He worked at a mental hospital in the United States where his uncle was psychiatrist dealing with the chronic schizophrenics. Later, he became a Management executive and a business magnet working at Delhi. Arun Joshi was influenced by Existential writers like Albert Camus and Sartre. His philosophical leanings are basically towards Hinduism. He was also influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and Jaiprakash Narayan. World Literature Today (Oklahoma University) hailed him as "one of the very few Indo-English novelists who holds mirror to the subtleties and complexities of contemporary Indian life".

Arun Joshi has written five novels :-

- a) *The Foreigner* (1968)
- b) *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*
- c) *The Apprentice* (1974)
- d) *The Last Labyrinth* (1981)
- e) *The City and The River* (1990)

In an interview to Sujatha Mathai, Joshi said that the urge that led him to writing was "the exploration of that mysterious world, which is the human soul. And its lovely journey through a world where it is necessarily a stranger, a foreigner." C. Paul Verghese (1) says "Joshi in his search for new themes has renounced the larger world in favour of inner man and has engaged himself in search for the essence of human living." In his fiction Arun Joshi tries to show the predicament of the modern man, who is confronted by the self and question of his existence. The man fails to understand the very purpose of his life in the hostile world. The impact of modernization and industrialization generate tension and leads to meaninglessness of life. "The existential status of disappointment, isolation and meaninglessness are the unfortunate spiritual predicament of modern man. He is a helpless individual surrounded by the hostile universe. He shows that the self – alienation has worse effects on an individual than social alienation.

The concept of alienation is not at all new in literature. It has been used in theological, philosophical, sociological and psychological discourses. The concept has been well explained by David Riesman in his book. 'The Lonely Crowd.' According to him alienation is "the estrangement of individuals from one another due to lack of communication and mental understanding." In other words alienation means man's dehumanization and estrangement from family group or society or even from his own self.

Arun Joshi's novels exemplify these characteristics quite clearly. All the protagonists struggle to trace their roots. They elaborate upon the condition and existence of man, their place and function in the world, and their relationship or lack of one with the world. More often the hero fashions his own existence and only exists by so doing. In the process, by the choice of what he does or does not do, gives essence to that existence.

Arun Joshi's first novel, 'The Foreigner' (1968) depicts the geographical and mental alienation of a Kenyan – Indian Sindi Oberoi. His second novel. 'The Strange Case of Billy Biswas' describes the cultural alienation of an anthropologist, Billy Biswas who goes back to the traditional value system to find his identity. His third novel, 'The Apprentice' (1974) deals with ethical alienation of a middle class civil servant,

Ratan Rathor. His character undergoes radical change, but as a result becomes alienated from the society, family, friends and even from his own self. His fourth novel, 'The Last Labyrinth (1981) deals with the understanding born of suffering and humiliation that seems to have been presented as a solution to life's meaninglessness.

The fifth and the last novel, 'The City and The River' (1990) is entirely different from his earlier novels. This novel presents a political scenario of the times. There are obvious parallels between emergency regime in India and one portrayed in the novel.

All the protagonists appearing in the novels of Arun Joshi appear to be uneasy and alienated souls. In 'The foreigner' Sindi Oberoi is a man without roots. The novel gives a strange feeling of aloneness and aloofness. Sindi is a foreigner whether he is in London, Boston or in New Delhi. He is a child of mixed parentage. He is born in Kenya of a Kenyan Indian father and an English mother. He becomes an orphan at the age of four when his parents die in an air – crash near Cairo. He is brought up by his uncle in Kenya who also dies soon. He is totally broken and anchorless. Right in his childhood, he is devoid of parental love and affection. When he comes to United States, the feeling of foreignness is greatly experienced by him even when he is among foreign students. He is " an alien everywhere – physically as well as metaphorically. "He is a born foreigner. He admits, "My foreignness lay within me." (3) He grows up without family ties and country. Denied of love and cultural roots, he becomes a wandering alien and rootless.

O. P. Bhatnagar rightly says, "a strange feeling of aloneness and aloofness – permeates the entire narrative and provides the necessary texture and structure of the novel. "(4) The lasting impressions on the life of Sindi Oberoi his escapades with Anna, a minor artist separated from her husband who was not interested in him or in anybody, but for her lost youth; and Kathy who left him later and went back to her husband because "She thought marriage was scared and had to be maintained at all costs" (168),(5) These incidents taught him to practice detachment and non-involvement in human emotions. In Boston, he gets "involved" in short-lived but passionate love for June; but in spite of his determination does not get involved. He says "Marriage wouldn't help June. We are alone both your and I. That is the problem. And our aloneness must be resolved from within. You cannot send two persons through a ceremony and expect that their aloneness will disappear." (6) Witnessing the terrible consequences of practicing detachment, he decides to leave the country and go to India, "Like many of my breed, I believed erroneously that I could escape from the part of myself by hopping from one land mass to another." (176)(7)

Arun Joshi's second novel 'The Strange Case of Billy Biswas' depicts the cultural alienation of an anthropologist Billy Biswas who goes back to the old value – system. When Billy realized the shallowness of civilization and the superficiality of its sense of values both in U.S. and India, he feels himself alienated from society, friends, parents, wife and his own true nature. Though, he comes from the Indian upper class, he realizes that this life was shallow, artificial, only an imitation of Western ideas. Often he is found behaving strangely because he has love for humanity. His decision to do Ph. D. in anthropology instead of Engineering testifies his love for humanity. His assault on the driver of the car which has splashed mud on Turla Lindgren may appear beastly but is a symbolic human act of protest against mechanized, dehumanized people who have no concern for the feelings of others. By disappearing into the saal forests of Maikala hills, he not only withdraws from the society, but, he makes an attempt to reintegrate himself with nature and primitive people. His constant quarrels and suspension of sexual relationship with his wife, Meena, shows his alienation. To him now, Meena represents the greedy civilization which did everything for money. Now, he settles down in Maikala hills as 'a refugee from civilization (8) and shares the pleasures worries and agonies of the Bhils. He also falls in love and soon marries Bilasia a tribal beauty. In the company of Maikala hills, Billy's primitive self is rejuvenated. He feels happy in the forest not because of money, position or job but because of, "the earth, the forests, rainbows, the liquor from the mahua, an occasioned feast, a lot of dancing and love making, and more than anything else, no ambition, none at all" (148) (9).

Ten years later, Romi the Collector discovers Billy in loin-cloth completely tribalised. When Billy's father comes to know about him, he organizes a search for him. Finally, he is hunted down and killed. Thus, Billy meets the pathetic end at the end of the novel as he is unable to succumb to the pressures of the modern materialistic civilization.

Arun Joshi's third novel, 'The Apprentice' presents the status of contemporary man "sailing about in a confused society without norms, without even, perhaps, a purpose, "(74) (10). It deals with the past memories of Ratan Rathor. Ratan's father was a freedom fighter who had a deep reverence for Gandhi and under whose influence he had given up the legal profession. His father was shot dead by a British sergeant in the freedom movement. After the death of his father, Ratan comes to Delhi. He somehow manages to live there in sarai with few others who help him in the hour of need. He starts his quest for a job. His friends pretend to help him. At last he realizes the gravity of situation that there is no point in being honest and

virtuous. He becomes dishonest. He adopts himself to the changing situation and gets a job. His material stability improves but loses the mental one. Hence he repents.

Ratan seems to be more influenced by his mother who reminded him “it was not patriotism but money .... that brought respect and both security, Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws ....but money was a law unto itself (20). To get money, he uses all kinds of deception. He joins the rat race. He is taken to drinking and womanizing. He signs a deal and takes bribe for purchase of war material. Consequently, defective war material is supplied to army in the Indo-China war and his old childhood friend Brigadier is killed. Ratan is arrested and taken to prison.

On his release, Ratan compares his rapid moral downfall to his fathers glorious heritage. He compares his material prosperity to his spiritual bankruptcy. He feels the futility and meaninglessness of his life. He decides to repent for the misdeeds. He estranges himself from his family and begins to realize his own self. He says that he had a shaky start and a shaky man is like a blotting paper which becomes black if the ink is black and red if the ink is red. He reflects his life as a great waste. He realizes the gravity of sin committed. His conscience pricks him to such an extent that he alienates himself from his family and society. He remarks, “Twenty years and nothing gained. An empty lifetime. What had I learned? Pushing files and maneuvering? (139) (11)

He wishes to change the existing situation but he finds himself helpless. Out of an acute sense of alienation he decides to do penance by wiping the shoes of the congregation outside the temple. By doing this, he wishes to retribute for the sins he had committed. He performs this act without any vanity or expectation. Here Ratan’s situation could be compared to the plight of Sisyphus. His wiping of shoes at temple gates is just like Sisyphus’s unending labor of rolling the stone onto the mountain top. Such realization is the result of the acceptance of guilt. Ratan has self realization at the end and says. “Whatever you do touches some one somewhere.”(12)

“The Last Labyrinth portrays the spiritual alienation of a millionaire industrialist, Som Bhaskar. Som is born in a prosperous business family. He has inbuilt hunger for something vague, undefined and unidentified. He is haunted by mysterious voices, “ I want, I want. I want. Through the light of my days and blackness of my nights and the disquiet of those sleepless hours .... I had sung the same strident song : I want. I want. I want. (13)

Initially, he mistakes his hunger for sex and indulges in sex escapades with several women, but he fails to arrive at any peace of mind. Though he is married to a modern girl Geeta, he is more attracted to an antique-looking woman – Anuradha. She was an illegitimate child born of an insane mother. She was molested as a child and was a witness to murder and suicide. She was exploited by her aunt who wanted to make her an actress. Som met her while transacting a business deal with Aftab. She had been living with Aftab without a formal marriage. He says to Anuradha, “ I’ll tell you what is wrong ..... I am dislocated. My mind is out of focus. There is something sitting right in front of me. I cannot see it.” (107) (14) Anuradha explains to him his reasons for unhappiness and dissatisfaction, “You don’t know what is wrong and you don’t know what you want.” Som often questions himself like the Lotus Eaters – “If death is to wind up all what is the point in running madly with outstretched arms in pursuit of little pleasure, little vendettas of life. \*65) (15)

In the company of Anuradha, he finds peace and repose. But he is unable to get Anuradha totally released from Aftab. So, he decides to buy the remaining shares of Aftab’s company to humiliate him. But, Anuradha, who held fifty percent of shares, sells them to Lord Krishna. Som, thus searches the temples in the mountains to which she has bequeathed her shares. This journey, symbolically, becomes a reaching out to his soul. He comes out from the labyrinth of his reason, into the domain of faith. ‘The last Labyrinth’ thus ends with the probable possibilities of coming to faith.

Our age is peculiar in one respect, in the words of George Seiner it is “the age of the refugees”. The rootless man is the contemporary everyman. Alvin Toffler has spoken of the modern man as the “the new nomad”. Arun Joshi exploits it cleverly. He depicts his heroes/protagonists as alienated from society which is the most prevalent kind of alienation and secondly, from self. They are existing to trace their identity or in a way to create their identity in the world which is hostile to them. Their stance seems to be very precarious as they cannot adopt themselves to the norms and pulse of society. It is this division of the SELF which does not let them to live in peace.

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