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Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice*: A Threnody of a Tormented Soul of Modern World

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Abstract

Arun Joshi's third novel *The Apprentice* is a story of the protagonist Ratan Rathor who out of sheer exhaustion of joblessness and privation is forced to shed the honesty and the old-world morality of his father to become an 'apprentice' to the corrupt civilization. He is rebellious whose idealism is shattered by the corruption in modern society. Early in his struggle for a job, he is torn between the world of his father's idealism and mother's pragmatism. The tussle between idealism and morality on the one hand and the craze for money and career on the other creates a void in his psyche. He wants to extricate his identity from the heaps of corruption but fails. The ghastly death of his friend, the Brigadier, shakes him out of his moral inertia. The dead Brigadier's vision trails him wherever he goes. He is filled with an endless torment of fear. With deep remorse, he realizes the futility of his life and decides to be of some use to others.

Keywords

Corruption; Tormented Soul; Modern Society.

In the modern society, money is the highest of all values. There is a wide gap between the rich and the poor of the society. Wealth accumulates in the hands of few individuals, who exploit the masses and reduce them to poverty and servitude. Such a society is violent and oppressive. The rapid growth of affluent society, the poverty and hunger of the masses, the deterioration of moral values, the tension between ensuing generations resulting from changing ethos make increasing and often disturbing demands on the individuals and lead to their predicament.

In *The Apprentice*, Arun Joshi delineates the story of Ratan Rathor who is a child of double heritage- the patriotic and ideal world of his father and worldly selfish and sagacious universe of his mother. His father gave up his legal profession and sacrificed his life as a believer in the Gandhian creed of non-violence. He was shot dead by a British sergeant while leading a procession of freedom fighters. His father's life of service and courageous martyrdom in the case of Indian Independence left a deep imprint on Ratan's impressionable mind and he genuinely tries to emulate his father's example.

While Ratan studies in the college, he is haunted by the memory of his father who advised him to be good, to be respected and to be of use. He intends to make a mark on the world, a mark as visible and striking as his father's. He toys with the idea of following his father and even decides to join the clandestine army of Subhash Bose. He affirms: "I am on my way to greatness. I tell myself about to lay the foundations of a glorious future" (Joshi 21). He has tenaciously nursed his father's ideals but his sudden death creates a problem of alarming proportion for him. It is the natural psychological need of the child to win maternal admiration for uncommon heroic achievements. As a result in the last minute, the memory of his father's death, instead of strengthening his

decision to join the army, demoralises him and he fails to enlist his name as a soldier. He weeps in humiliation, ashamed of his own cowardice. This reminiscence is accompanied by his agony, when he comments, “And there are memories whose sting neither time nor words can heal. They barrow in the body of your soul, like maggots, wriggling, mocking, green forever” (Joshi 21). This shows the tragedy of the unbridgeable gap between the worlds of reality and dreams. His disillusioned mother wants him to be pragmatic and to realize the value of money: “Man without money was a man without worth. Many things great in life, but the greatest of them all was money” (Joshi 19). His father’s donation of his income and property and his mother’s suffering from tuberculosis makes Ratan’s life a suffering. While living with his tubercular mother, “It is like living with death”.

After completing college education on loaned money, Ratan goes to Delhi for a job. Early in his struggle for a job, he realizes that the honour of being the son of a martyr is of no practical value and breaks his faith in the value of goodness, virtue and humanity. He visits office after office to be examined, interviewed, interrogated and rejected. In this way his mother’s sudden death makes Ratan helpless, poor, insecure and in the state of crisis and fear about his future. During his stay in an inn with five other room-mates, he takes recourse to lying to command respect of them. At the age of twenty-one, he becomes a hypocrite and a liar, in short, a sham and a master faker. When he almost dies of sun-stroke, his room-mates help him to recover from illness. Then a fortuitous introduction by one of them secures him a job of a temporary clerk in the department of war purchases. Then Ratan’s only aim is to make his career: “Educated, intelligent, cultured, and it was my right that I should rise in life, to levels higher than others aspired for” (Joshi 31).

With the help of his obedience and docility he wins the confidence of the superintendent who later on confirms his job. For the sake of his career, he marries the superintendent’s niece. According to R.S. Pathak, “He is almost

invariable in a high strung mental condition, which threatens to ravage his soul and deprive him of his personality and identity”. His marriage with the superintendent’s niece is degraded into the deal for the conformation in the service. At that time he comes to know the world runs on the basis of deals. He says,

If men forgot how to make deals the world would come to a stop. It would lose its propelling power. Men would not know what to do with themselves. They would lose interest. It is not the atom or the sun or the god or sex that lies at the heart of the universe: it is DEALS. (Joshi 48)

He becomes an officer within a couple of days after his marriage. Though he rises and brings the comfort through corrupt practices, he is far from achieving satisfaction.

He states his pathetic condition: “The more money I accumulated, the more I was dissatisfied and the more I was determined to “enjoy” life. And all the time I thought of death” (Joshi 85). The tragedy of Ratan lies in his consciousness that practically “he has been gradually sinking into the abyss of darkness of corruption, exploitation and bourgeois filth” (Pandey 97). His existence is tormented by the question “why did I take the bribe? (Joshi 61) because he feels that he has accepted bribe when he really does not need money. He stoops low, without realizing the fact that it is related to the security of his country. He derives the courage from the observation that everyone is busy amassing wealth by exploiting the opportunities thrown out by the war.

Ratan’s experience of signing the deal and visiting the brothel in Bombay corrupts him so much that he reaches the peak of dung heap. In utter confusion he feels fed up with the life of hypocrisy, deception and all around corruption. He becomes isolated and estranged from society. He expresses his traumas and agonies:

How, 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 me and turned me to ashes. Believe me, I have seen it happen. I have seen my soul turns to ashes. (Joshi 71)

Ratan's confession "my soul turns to ashes" is a proof of his moral degradation in the civilized society.

The hopelessness of life inspires nausea in Ratan Rathor who thinks of bringing about a change in the existing set up and writes an article entitled 'Crisis of Character'. But soon it is seen that he flouts old values for the sake of career, and is sucked in the vortex of bureaucratic and practical corruption. He experiences the pangs of the so called civilization with its inevitable traits-lying, hypocrisy, bribery, drunkenness, and worse, womanizing. His passing of the defective war materials results in the death of his own friend, the Brigadier. This news terribly shocks his inner self. After the Brigadier's death a feeling of loneliness comes over him. He, in fact, remains entangled in a sordid business with catastrophic consequences. He accepts a huge bribe to clear a defective supply of war material from Himmat Singh, a character of astonishing impact who ultimately reveals himself as a sort of Ratan's alter-ego. It leaves him totally frustrated and shattered.

Ratan wants to be free from the shackles of valueless urban civilization. But he takes almost a life-time to free himself from the corrupt civilization. In his eagerness, he visits the temple to derive courage from the world of religion. To his horror, however, he discovers that every religion is not free from corruption; it is corrupt and can hardly be expected to provide any solutions to various problems of meaningless world. Finally he tries to restore his mental peace by undergoing the most difficult penance in the world; every morning he wipes outside the temple the shoes of the congregation.

The Apprentice, which is inspired by Albert Camus' *The Fall*, also depicts the pitiable plight of the contemporary man "sailing about in a confused society without norms, without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose" (Joshi 74). Like Camus, Joshi also seems to be trying to make his hero simultaneously a 'portrait, mask and mirror' of the modern man, baffled as much by the loss of parameters to judge right from wrong, as by the absence of moral values.

Saddled by the dichotomy in his double inheritance, and respectful of having misguidedly pursued the false philosophy of 'becoming one with the society around on its own terms', he becomes a near nervous wreck under the strain of salvaging a modicum of self-respect on which he is to rebuild the edifice of the remaining years of his life.

According to H.M. Prasad and K.R.S. Iyengar the failure of faith in nobility, education, justice, friendship and hard work shocked him earlier, but at present he becomes one of those who see that the old values are useful no more. But now he regrets and repents his past deeds. He becomes restless. He makes compromises, but every compromise gnaws at his conscience. The novel is in confessional tone wherein the narrator - protagonist 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 into his inner life and exposes the perfidy, chicanery, cowardice and corruption of his own character at the mock heroic level. It exposes the evils of the world. Iyenger rightly observes: "As a fictional study of the anatomy and dynamics of the almost omnipresent corruption in the country, *The Apprentice* is a powerful indictment. The human story and the stark message both come through" (qtd. in Bhatnagar 144). Indeed, the novel is a powerful social document and a threnody of a tormented soul of modern world.

Ratan, an honest and virtuous man, realizes the gravity of the situation he finds himself in owing to his goodness, love of truth and the like. But in his

feverish pursuit of careerism, he changes his stance. He begins to tell lies pretends in accordance to the need, and follows favourable means for a happy life.

Modern man may either try or adjust to the others, to society, to the system, abdicating his true self, or he may strive to keep and develop his individuality and thus alienate from the society. We find both these types of alienation in Ratan Rathor. He begins his life with high ambitions and ideals to be honest, true to his self and, like his father, make a mark in the world. But he finds himself a misfit in the modern world. He had to abdicate his true self to fit in the corrupt society and eke out a living. He is alienated from his true self in the process. He realizes that his life has been a great waste. He confesses to Himmat Singh: "There are many sorrows in the world but there is nothing in this world to match the sorrow of a wasted life" (Joshi 140). In this novel Joshi portrays the most acute kind of self-alienation.

Ratan finally realizes that life may well be zero but it is not necessarily purposeless. Hence, out of an acute sense of alienation and a quest to understand the meaninging of life, Ratan undergoes the sternest apprenticeship for his earlier misdeeds. Every morning he sits on the steps outside the temple and wipes the shoes of the congregation. It is because he remembers what his father told him: "Whatever, you do it touches someone somewhere" (Joshi 143).

According to C.N. Srinath, "*The Apprentice* is the tale of conscience-torn man with a curious mixture of idealism and docility, a vague sense of values, a helpless self-deceptive effort to flout them for the sake of a career in short, with a deep awareness of the conflict between life and living. The sadness of the story is that while the society was responsible for shattering Ratan's personality with its confusion of values and caused alienation, it has however failed to help him retrieve his lost integrity of the self" (qtd. in Sindkhedkar 192).

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