



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Quest for a Meaningful Life in Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice*

Ms. Punam V. Barabde

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shri Shivaji Science College,
Amravati, Maharashtra, India.

Abstract

Today everything conspires towards a philosophy of meaninglessness, boredom and the absurd. The twentieth century especially the post-world war period has been an age of great spiritual stress and strain and has rightly been regarded as 'The Age of Alienation'. It has shrunk in spirit, languishing in confusion, frustration, disintegration, disillusionment and meaninglessness. Unlike the existentialists or his western counterparts, Arun Joshi never accepts alienation as the ultimate condition of life. It is transitional phase in the protagonist's quest for self-knowledge. Deeply influenced by the technique of the Upanishads and the Gita, Joshi looks upon man's life on the earth as 'apprentice in soul making' (Sharma 123). His novel *The Apprentice* attempts to discover the meaning of life. It tries to devise the ways and means for the eliminating the discrepancy between the individual's pursuits and his fulfillment. The protagonist Ratan Rathor is neither religious nor a saint, but he is humble enough to learn the lesson taught to him by life through

problems. Finally he expiates his sins of cowardice, dishonesty and even indirect murder. He learns the lesson of humility.

Keywords

Alienation; Quest; Expiate; Meaninglessness; Corruption.

◆

Lionel Trilling is of the view that the novel is “a perpetual quest, for reality” and it is “the most effective agent of the moral imagination” of our time. The Indian Novel in English is now an integral part of Indian reality. Arun Joshi is one of those modern Indian novelists in English who have broken new grounds. In his search for new themes, he has renounced the larger world in favour of the inner man and has engaged himself in the search for the essence of human living. All his protagonists have shown restlessly searching for their roots and knowing the purpose of their existence on this planet.

Joshi finds man in the contemporary society as totally frustrated, separated and alienated. It is mainly due to emphasizing too much on material comforts and totally neglecting the moral progress. His novels are the revelation of human predicament in an indifferent and inscrutable universe. The present society is full of exploitations. There is only chaos, confusion and anarchy in social life. Arun Joshi is pained to see the chaotic condition of the society. He, therefore, takes in his hand the task of providing a solution to the society, to escape from the vicious circle of rapid industrialization. Thus, through the struggles of his protagonists he aims to achieve a good society and happy and joyful individuals.

Arun Joshi's third novel *The Apprentice* is a quest for meaning in life. Ratan Rathod finds himself trapped in corruption, exploitation, and similar bourgeois filth. His approval of the defective war material which results in death of thousands of men and his friend Brigadier is to face court martial in near future. Ratan's confession can save the Brigadier. Ratan finds himself in a

tight corner. In order to seek peace and moral courage, Ratan visits the temple and prays to Lord Krishna: “O God, help me. I am in trouble and I have come to your door. Give me refuge. Give me courage. Just for a day lend me your courage. Help me” (Joshi 118).

It can be seen that Ratan is entirely in the grip of duplicity, deception, selfishness and immortality, prevailing in the modern society. From the temple he comes to his office and writes his letter of confession. He decides to meet the Superintendent of Police in the evening, but later on he does not confess at all. In the meanwhile, the Brigadier kills himself by shooting in the head and this incident shakes Ratan.

Ratan’s morality is so completely eroded that he cannot bring himself to confess before the authorities. He goes again to the temple for peace but he meets a priest, who is ready to grease his palm to save the skin of his son, a contractor, who used substandard material in the construction and it resulted in the collapse of many roofs and he is facing the trial. He concludes that even religion is not free from corruption and no succor can be drawn from it and he makes it a point never to enter a temple again.

Being shocked and shaken by the death of his own friend, the Brigadier, Ratan resolves to take revenge on Himmat Singh. He holds Himmat Singh responsible for his friend’s death. So he decides to kill him to redeem him and his dead friend’s honour. When he reaches his house, he comes to know from dying Himmat Singh that he is trapped in the corrupt system where men are weighed with money or power limiting his options.

Ratan is deflated when informed by dying Himmat Singh that the Secretary and the Minister are involved in the deal. In this way he is trapped in the corrupt system because he is “a spineless flunkey” (Joshi 131). He is merely a tool in the hands of high-ups. It has a profound impact on Ratan and is largely responsible for the change in his outlook on life. Ratan realizes that there is no end to human vanity or human stupidity. The dead Brigadier’s

vision trails him wherever he goes. Ratan is filled with an endless torment of fear. He realized the gravity of his sin. At last his alert consciousness alienates him from the degenerated society:

Twenty years and nothing gained. An empty lifetime. What had I earned? Pushing files? Manoeuvring? At forty –five all that I knew was to manoeuvre. A trickster, that was what I had left life make of me. Did I know the meaning of honour, friendship? Did I ever know it? Would I ever know it again? (Joshi 133)

Ratan realizes the futility and hollowness of his whole life. He feels that his whole life has been a great waste. He is not sure what precisely corrupted the atmosphere of the society. He feels the need of doing something for changing the prevailing situation. But he is full of doubts about the way to rid the society of this pestilence. Ratan finally realizes that one cannot live for oneself because no human act is performed in isolation and without consequence. Therefore each act should be performed with a sense of responsibility.

Now he firmly decides upon putting himself to social use and thereby expiates his sin. But the question is as to how to put oneself to social use and to have faith in what kind of God:

The superintendent's God is no use. Of that I am sure. Whose God then? The God of Kurukshetra? The God of Gandhiji? My father's God, in case he had any? And whose Revolution? The Russian? The Chinese? The American? My father's? Whose? Could they possibly be the same—Revolution and God? Revolution and some God? Coinciding at some point on the horizon. (Joshi 142)

According to Gandhi, the greatest religion of man is to put oneself to selfless service which only suffering and sacrifice can make possible. Ratan chooses to have complete faith in God and in selfless social service. Thus, he opts for the ethical choice by which, in Kierkegaardian sense, he surrenders his self to God.

Hence out of an acute sense of alienation and a quest to understand the meaning of life, Ratan undergoes the sternest apprenticeship in the world. Every morning he goes to the temple to wipe the shoes left near the threshold by the devotees. Even the memory of shoes, according to Ratan, acts as a check on his lapsing into his old ways:

And during the day, whenever I find myself getting to be clever, lazy, vain, indifferent, I put up my hands to my face and there is the smell of a hundred feet that must at that moment be toiling somewhere and I am put in my place. (Joshi 143)

Ratan's unsparing criticism of his own failing is the part of the cleansing process, the real goal of all confessions. Wiping of shoes has symbolic overtones of the Christian concept of Christ's washing the feet of his disciples on Maundy Thursday. Only humility can help Ratan to get rid of all delusions that made his life an endless torrent of fear. According to Ratan, one never knows what emptiness lies within one and which, when the time comes, one would fill up with the muck. He suggests the possibility of even the shoe shining is being one more act of filling the void with muck. The failure of the act of penance to have any curative affect whatsoever on his fractured self is owned by Ratan himself.

The enigmatic reference to his own solemn act of penance as rigmarole points his lack of seriousness. At the same time instead of throwing additional light, it only complicates the riddle of Ratan's penitence in so far as his continuing with it is concerned. It is a self-prescribed act, as he is not answerable to anyone, and can easily have discontinued it, particularly when, according to his own admission, it does not produce any salutary chance. It can mean only one thing - he still has hopes of it curing him and is prepared to wait. Even, when everything is lost 'the future still remains', and it is a measure of Ratan's courage that instead of running away from the mess he made of his life, he takes the first step in setting things right.

According to V. Gopal Reddy, one may unmistakably find in *The Apprentice* the impact of Camus' *The Fall*. Jean Baptiste Clemence is a successful barrister in *The Fall* like Ratan Rathor. He is the very epitome of good citizenship and decent behavior in the beginning. But suddenly he sees through the deep-seated hypocrisy of his existence to the condescension which motivates his action. He turns to debauchery, and finally settles in the fog-bound wilderness of Amsterdam as a self-styled 'judge penitent', where he describes his fall to a chance acquaintance.

In *The Apprentice*, Ratan does not practice the psychological ruse of Clemence to judge others before they can judge him. If Ratan's stifling of conscience is inexcusable, his genuine repentance, and his refusal to allow his guilt to paralyse his will to turn a new leaf is highly commendable. In direct contrast to Clemence's relieved cry, "A second time, eh, what a risky suggestion ---- It's too late now. It'll always be too late. Fortunately" (Bhatnagar 14), Ratan welcomes a second chance with the sincere conviction: "One must try and not lose heart, not yield, at any cost to despair" (Joshi 143).

Through the character of Ratan, the novelist seems to project that in life no man has courage to whole heartedly choose right or wrong. In him he presents a curious mixture of self-evasion, vanity, self-condemnation and humility. But the fact Ratan could not bring himself to confession confirms his self-love and cowardice which he now wishes to cover-up by his humility of action. On a close reading, the novel evokes a continued distrust of Ratan even to his act of atonement. If it is read the other way round then the novel becomes a bad homily on the sin of dishonesty.

According to Joshi, the only way to save man from corruption, exploitation, and similar bourgeois filth is through integrity. The integrity is tested only in the fires of existential choice. Ratan has lost his self and felt the anguish of loss. His existential decision to recover the lost self through an act of penitence reveals the need to realize and prize one's integrity.

Ratan is keen on finding out the ‘purpose’ of life. But he takes almost a life-time to free himself from the shackles of the valueless urban civilization. In his eagerness, he visits the temple to derive courage from the world of religion. To his horror, however, he discovers that even religion is not free from corruption; it is corrupt and can hardly be expected to provide any solution to various problems of this meaningless world.

As a result, Arun Joshi suggests another remedy to problems of life, which is within the easy reach of the common man. Ratan comes to realize and rightly so that life may well be a zero, but it need not be negative. He becomes conscious of the folly of his earlier life and undergoes the most difficult penance for his earlier misdeeds. Every morning on his way to the office, he sits on the steps outside the temple and wipes the shoes of the congregation.

Though the future of the country looks gloomy, yet the young, as Ratan tells the listener “might yet hold back the tide” (Joshi 144). The novelist pins his hopes on new generation and ends the novel with a positive note of affirmation. There is hope as long as young men are willing to learn and ready to sacrifice, as they have done many a time before. Ratan exhorts the young to rise to the occasion and make a second start. It is never too late. And late is better than never. The novel ends at dawn, symbolic of Ratan’s transformation and regeneration: “It is a cold dawn. But no matter. A dawn after all, is a dawn” (Joshi 144).

Works Cited

Joshi, Arun. *The Apprentice*. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2011. Print.

M.K. Bhatnagar. *The Novels of Arun Joshi – A Critical Study*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001. Print.

Sharma, Siddhartha. *Arun Joshi’s Novels - A Critical Study*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2004. Print.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Barabde, Punam V. "Quest for a Meaningful Life in Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice*." *Literary Quest* 2.1 (2015): 30-37. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.