

Arun Joshi: An Existential Novelist

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Abstract

This paper attempts to present Arun Joshi as an existential writer, whose works are different from others in Indian English literature. There are three influences have worked on Arun Joshi viz, European Existentialism, Hinduism and partly Buddhism. Though these philosophies seem to be bit different from each other but Joshi has simultaneously brought out in his fiction. Hence Joshi's novels are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of Joshi himself.

Keywords: European Existential philosophy, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Bhagavad-Gita. Etc..

Arun Joshi's Sahitya Akademi award winning novel 'The Last Labyrinth' represents a remarkable achievement and marks the full maturity of the Indian English fiction. Joshi's contribution to the Indian English literature is totally five novels and one short story. *The Foreigner* (1968) *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) *The Apprentice* (1974) *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and The River* (1990). Along with these novels, Joshi has also contributed a collection of short stories entitled *The Survivor* (1975).

This article attempts to present Arun Joshi as an existential writer whose fiction marks a conjunction of existential philosophy and religious-spiritual quest. Three influences have worked on Arun Joshi to produce this blend European existentialism, Hinduism and Buddhism. About existentialism, Joshi himself says in an interview, "I did read Camus and Sartre, I liked *The Plague* and read *The Outsider*. I might have been influenced by them. Sartre, I did not understand clearly. As for existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, I have never understood anything except odd statements"¹. Joshi has also been influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and The Bhagwat Gita. The ideal of Gita "is compressed in the two words karma yoga"², and expressed in values such as artha, kama, dharma and moksha. He believes that existentialism is a highly existentialist oriented philosophy since it attaches so much value to the right way to live. In addition to this Joshi has also been influenced by Buddhism in terms of detachment and the quest for meaning of life.

Joshi's novels are not merely influenced by existential philosophy, they are also characterized by the

Hindu way of life. The protagonists of Joshi have longed for liberation of inner soul in other words to get moksha. The three ways to salvation are 'The Karma Marga, (the path of duty), the jnana Marga (the path of knowledge) and the path of Bhakti Marga (the path of devotion)'. For Hinduism, interior life belongs to the path of spiritual progress the quest of liberation and the tendency to renunciation.

Joshi is partly influenced by Buddhism in terms of theme of renunciation of world and moves towards freedom. According to Buddhist philosophy, life is an impermanent illusion, full of grief and suffering and of individual existence as painful and involving limitation. All this causes Buddha finally to realize the need for renunciation of the unpleasant darkness of life and give up the princely life to become a wandering ascetic.

Joshi's recurrent theme is alienation in its different aspects and his heroes are seekers who grope towards a purpose in life and self fulfilment. He attempts to deal with three facets of the theme of alienation, the self, the society and humanity at large respectively. Alienation is expressed differently in the four novels but all the protagonists are victims of it in similar ways.

The Foreigner is Arun Joshi's first and one of the most significant novels published in 1960s in Indian English literature. He has put a great deal of himself into the protagonist of this novel. Sindi Oberai, the protagonist of the novel presented as an existential being whose life is rootless, alienated, absurd, meaningless and purposeless. It also examines the theme of alienation and involvement and man's despair when he is unable to find a meaning in

life. What explores is not merely the characteristics of alienation but also is responsibility towards down trodden people and his life journey from existentialism to Karma Yoga. Joshi has set this novel half in America and half in India.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas deals with the theme of meaninglessness, absurdity and the loneliness of civilization. Here Joshi has brought out the predicament and progress of an existential protagonist who is flying from civilization to the aboriginal life in order to search for the meaning of life. The novel also examines existential elements such as individual freedom, choice, etc. and the conflict between civilization and the primitive life and between art and nature.

The only son of a Supreme Court judge is sent to school in England and further to America to study engineering. On his arrival in New York, he takes up his lodging in the outskirts in Harlem famous for slums, because white America is much too civilized for him. Even on his return to India he could not feel very much happy at home.

He has enough materials, wealth, friends and money. His father was an ambassador and has everything that the civilization could give his son. Billy has been married to a beautiful and well educated Meena. But all this would not please his inner cravings or fulfil the emptiness of his soul. The tired, frustrated and empty life of civilization makes Billy alienated from it and flee into the primitive society.

Joshi's third novel *The Apprentice* is indeed an outstanding novel in the history of Indo - English literature. Though it was published in 1974, the novel mainly deals with the theme of contemporary individual problems in Indian society. Outwardly it seems to be a bit different than Joshi's earlier novels, but inwardly it is deeply rooted in the theme of existentialism. The existential states of alienation, absurdity and choice and lastly but not least the theme of corruption, are enacted in this novel as in the earlier novels.

The protagonist of the novel is in the process of life and as a result, is alienated from his own self and society. Joshi has brought out through this novel the hypocrisies, cowardice and the corruption of Indian society.

The Last Labyrinth deals with the theme of a young ambitious, top business executive in a faceless metropolitan city. Som Bhasker the protagonist of the novel has gone to the world's finest universities and his father has spent an immense fortune on his education. After returning from the states he establishes a plastic factory and becomes a millionaire.

At the age of thirty he is married to a woman of his choice named Geeta who begets two children. But he fails to achieve what he wants. He renounces his wife and children and tries to seek the meaning of life throughout womanizing and boozing. His endless trips from Bombay to Banaras make him alienated from his self and do not settle anything in his life. When he does not find any meaning in Anuradha and Lal Haveli and other woman, he tries to kill himself but he is stopped by his wife Geeta.

The Last Labyrinth examines the author's own views on life, love, God and death in relation to Last Labyrinth. It traces the interplay of existential philosophy and the Hindu view of life. This novel is unique in Arun Joshi's fiction because the protagonist's alienation is not redeemed by any final affirmation.

Joshi's fifth and final novel *The City and The River* (1990) is a political parable of the times. It is a commentary on the times unfolding its story in the City by the River which is governed by the Grand Master, a tyrannical patriarchal figure and his council of advisors. It is a political novel in the sense that it deals with the malpractices resorted by the protagonist in order to gain power and to eliminate the voices of dissent. It is also a story of great struggle, terrible suffering, and exemplary spiritual courage shown by beleaguered people who resist till the death of the authoritarianism of an ambitious ruler who wants to become a king. It contains a severe indictment of corruption and malpractices of the country's ruling class namely the political leaders, business man, Police, and Army chiefs. It contains echoes of the Indian emergency of the 1970s and reflects the Indian reality of times.

Joshi does not write fiction according to any formula, rather he grapples with the moment of crisis in human life. He experiments with the medium of literature for studying man's predicament and off himself. Hence in his reply to M.R. Dua on September 3 he says "My novels are

essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of myself. If I did not write, I imagine I would use some other medium to carry on my exploration"³.

In all these ways, the novels of Arun Joshi are memorably different from those of the other Indian English novelist. Essentially, he is a soul-searching novelist and his novels undoubtedly constitute a positive contribution to Indian English fiction.

References

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