

QUEST MOTIF IN THE NOVELS OF ARUN JOSHI :THE APPRENTICE AND THE LAST LABYRINTH

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Abstract: Indian English fiction started exploring contemporaneous concerns in the Gandhian era. Many Indian novelists began setting a saga of romances and tales particularly in a politically and socially recognizable context. Indian authors have created their own brand of writing in English by representing Indian culture and ethnicity in their best ways. Arun Joshi is an Indian –Anglican writer. He is one of the most significant contemporary Indian English novelists. Joshi is well known for his five novels which explore the throe of contemporary man in the materialistic world. In 1982 he won Sahitya Akademi Award for The Last Labyrinth. Joshi’s fictional technique varies from his predecessors and brings uniqueness to his novels. The quest for meaning in life is the central theme of his best works .His novels deal with the sense of meaninglessness of life which is the dominant feature of modern man in the contemporary epoch. Arun Joshi’s fictional world is a revelation of a world where man realizes his uniqueness and loneliness and is also confronted by the question of his existence.

Key terms: Indian culture, ethnicity, contemporary, materialistic, quest, loneliness, meaninglessness, existence.

Quest Motif:

The quest for meaning in life is a prime dogma of the philosophy of existentialism. According to the existentialists meaning of life can be found only in an attempt to be true to oneself. The quest for meaning in life begins with persistent tussle with one’s inner self. Arun Joshi’s fictional creations witness the extreme social, cultural and psychological pressures. All his novels are subjected to the issue concerning to the self identity search and psyche of modern man. The protagonists in his novels experience identity crisis and are in search of meaning and value of life. The conflict between socio-cultural pressures and alienated self is the central theme of Joshi’s novels. Arun Joshi handled very skillfully some of the grave issues like quest motif, identity crisis, alienated self and psychological pressure.

"Arun Joshi's is a peculiar talent and connoisseurs of style will have many things to say about The Apprentice... there is the promise of a new and vigorous personality in Indian fiction." — **Tribune**

The Apprentice published in 1974 is one of the best novels and writings of Arun Joshi. Joshi mainly focuses on the materialistic aspects of contemporary world and its impact on modern man for various reasons. Ratan Rathor is the protagonist of the novel who is conflicting between two philosophies- the “life” and the “living”. The theme of the novel clearly reflects the modern scenario of the Indian state. Joshi as used the technique of dramatic monologue. The novel is a confession of Ratan, the protagonist who was born in pre-independent India. The hero is a child of double inheritance. On one hand he had a strong influence of his father who was killed in the revolution for Independence. His father’s idealism taught him to be a devotee for his country and his fellow people. His father remarks pursuing career for personal profits is like “Bourgeois filth”(Joshi, 32) and on the other hand his mother says,” It was not patriotism but money, she said, that brought respect and bought security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws, she said, but money was law unto itself. (Joshi, 19).Due to contrary ideals he becomes a man of double personality which leads him to the crisis. Consequently, his words don’t match with his actions and he feels self alienated from self as well as his surroundings. In words of Tapan Gosh:

Crisis in the soul of an individual, who is entangled in the mess of contemporary life with its confusion of values and moral anarchy and his untiring quest for a remedy lie at the core of Arun Joshi’s exploration of human reality in *The Apprentice*. (Ghosh, 90)

Ratan Rathor being an unsophisticated youth, jobless arrives to Delhi in search of a career. He wishes to earn a name and prosperous future by following his father’s idealism. Ratan remarks,” “And I had no doubt that . . . I should make a mark on the world, a mark as visible and striking as my father’s” (Joshi, 23) He witnesses the fall of the nation and degradation of moralities. Corrupt and materialistic society tested his ethics and ideals at each and every step. In order to sustain his professional growth he sacrifices patriotism and honour. Seduced by materialistic values he has risked the lives of innocent people by accepting bribe from Himmat Singh to clear an arms consignment for the Ind-China war. He undergoes a profound change and says,” I had added a new dimension to my life. I had become, at the age of twenty-one, a hypocrite and a liar; in short, a sham From morning till night I told more lies than truths. I had become a master faker . . . a faker soon forgets who he really is That is when all starts to crumble.(Joshi, 27).Ratan continues lying and deceiving going in the wrong path. He feels helpless because he is forced to proceed. He expresses the power and enchantment of money like this: “. . . I did not need the money. I am quite sure of that. I needed it no more than sitting here, after two cups of tea, I need a third. I may drink it because others do, or because it is offered free, but I need it neither for survival nor happiness. (Joshi, 58).By the death of his close friend the Brigadier his understands that he living without life. Rathor’s immorality acts directly affected his friend’s life and disturbed him mentally and

led to his death by committing suicide. This incident makes him feel ashamed of himself and guilty for the death of the Brigadier. Despite his wealth and material comforts, he lacks satisfaction at heart.

Ratan in his confession seeks repentance for his great betrayal by killing his friend. The hero's self-destructive decision and moral ambivalence made him a fraud and a sinner against society. In order to achieve redemption for his guilt of accepting a bribe and becoming responsible for his friend's death, he chooses the Gandhian way by cleaning the shoes of the devotees every morning at a temple. The words of Himmat Singh remain Ratan Rathor's bind to his moral conscience to redeem himself from the sin. Thus he realizes that one cannot blame others for one's mistake and one could not reform the world, but oneself. Further, he keeps on reminding of being good and being some use to others.

Arun Joshi in his novel "*The Apprentice*" attacks materialistic values as defective materials which make modern man to fulfill their selfish needs. He portrayed the trend of the present society where people adopt favorable ends. Through Ratan's character, Joshi presents how people desire to become rich and ready to do anything for fulfilling their ends. Joshi very uniquely delineated the grave qualities like material attitude, cunning, degeneration of moral values and deceitfulness.

Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) won Sahitya Akademi award in 1982. It is one of the most unrivaled novels in the treatment of Indian ethos. Arun Joshi aims to portray this novel from the perspective of Indian culture and tradition. He clearly characterizes the psyche of the post-colonial youth and the culture of the nation.

Joshi has come up with an eternally contemporary theme where spiritual and sensuous dimensions are interwoven. The writer attempts to delve into the heart of the protagonist who searches for solace and worldly pleasures.

Som Bhaskar, the protagonist of the novel, is torn between the hunger of the soul and the hunger of the body where his body dominates the soul. Being a millionaire, Som has a luxurious life, married to a beautiful wife who has borne him two children and has got everything that is needed in life. But his rational mind is relentlessly driven by undefined hunger of the body which seeks to satisfy by possession – of a business enterprise, a woman or an object. This morally degenerated man is always in a cry of wanting and he affirms, "If only one knew! If only miracles were to take place, as of old, and one could suddenly, irrefutably, know. Without nagging, enervating doubts. I want. I want. If only one knew what one wanted. Or, may be, to know was what I wanted. To know. Just that. No more. No less." (Joshi, LL 53). In spite of his happy marriage with Geeta, he runs to different women to satisfy himself. But every affair leaves him alone in a puzzle and he feels, "I was a womanizer all right and a boozier, but my womanizing and boozing had not settled anything. I had inherited the affliction of both of them – for what were they if not afflictions, afflictions that had led me into unbearable entanglements." (Joshi, LL 144)

The novel reflects the mystical Indian way of life through the characters like Som's mother, Geeta, Anuradha and Gargi who administer trust and faith in Lord Krishna. Som's attraction towards Anuradha, a profound believer in God, helps him in the liberation of his soul. Som knows her in physical terms but his deep involvement results in the realization of the existence of God. The tortured soul of Som finds faith and repose in Anuradha's company. All the other characters extend their help in answering his quest for realization. Gargi says, "There is no harm in believing that God exists". Som is deeply absorbed in Anuradha that he plans to take her to Himalaya resort and then to Bombay in order to get solace in her company. But to his dismay, he suffers from a massive heart attack and couldn't meet Anuradha. He tries hard to contact her after his recovery from heart attack while Anuradha expresses her inability to meet him anymore, knowing that Som not only wants to possess her body but also her true love. Som falls into an absurd situation when Anuradha, the centre of his entire existence and purpose of quest, refuses to see him. Later, he learns from Gargi that he recovered from heart attack only due to Anuradha's sacrifice and prayers. Anuradha's rejection results in Som's physical and mental collapse. Disregarding his health condition, he takes an arduous journey to the mountains of La Haveli where Lord Krishna's temple is located. This journey adds dimension to the meaning of life, love, God, and Death, furthering the great mystery of the labyrinth of life. In one situation, Som asserts: "I want to know. Probably I want to believe. But one can't order belief. I must have evidence." (L. L. 213)

It appears that this journey gives spiritual comfort and harmony to his life and partly helps in cleansing his soul. Som realizes that eternal joy and happiness is achieved only through self-realization and spiritual enlightenment but not mere possession. His curiosity makes him to probe into: "That core of loneliness around which all of us are built." (L.L. 54) the protagonist is always in a quest driven by reason but not by faith. His incessant quest for the vitals of life and existence is guided by a mystical urge. Som Bhaskar encounters different individuals in his journey to the high mountains who live a peaceful life having faith in God. This brings realization in Som, leading him to the liberation of his soul. He comes into contact with the spiritual world and the world of faith. In conclusion, Som Bhaskar understands that only strong faith can eliminate the fear of death.

Conclusion:

Arun Joshi's *The last labyrinth* is an extension of the quest motif directly correlated with the identity issues. This novel also depicts the protagonist's quest for meaning and ultimate reality of life. The novelist echoes the need to balance rationalism and faith for a purposeful life. This novel with its eternally contemporary theme advocated the complexities of modern man and his place in the universe. In this way, Arun Joshi made an attempt to awake the reader from the labyrinth, the realization of self by exploring the meaning of life and death, reality and illusion, desire and resignation. Finally, Arun Joshi has explored the Indianess in his novel, suggesting that westernization can't bring solace to life as the native culture and tradition lies in the sub-conscious mind, deeply and often reverberates to the conscious mind for fulfillment.

"*The Last Labyrinth* is considered an outstanding contribution to Indian English literature for its restless search for a meaning in human existence, its treatment of the multiple levels of reality, challenging narrative technique and an evocative use of language." — **Sahitya Akademi Award Citation**

"The story is beautifully written... holds the reader's undivided attention to the *finis*." — **Khushwant Singh**

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