



Arun Joshi: A Study of the Indian Sensibility in his Novels

Dr Madhu Jindal

Associate Professor Dept. of English M.P. College for Women,
Mandi Dabwali-151001 Haryana, India.

Mail: madhugupta.mp@gmail.com

Mobile: 919467289183

Abstract

This article attempts to relate Arun Joshi's novels to the Indian sensibility and come to a fair understanding of its influence in shaping his moral vision. Every author is deep rooted in his own soil; and when he migrates to another culture, the primary and the secondary cultures start intermixing; giving rise to a hybrid sensibility which stands in native soil, but breathes in the foreign air. Arun Joshi's protagonists are foreign in their outlook and bearing, but their response systems are essentially Indian. It is not surprising that they look at the problems facing them at the existential level, with the Indian lens. This article attempts to visualize the psychological and spiritual legacy which refuse to be obliterated even in front of most pressing circumstances.

Keywords: Indian; Sensibility; diaspora; Vedas; Gita; Arun Joshi

Introduction

What is Indian sensibility, the Indian-ness of India? What is the sensibility unique to India, directly flowing from the cultural consciousness of its people? And what exactly is *sensibility*? What are the elements, the constructs of sensibility. To answer this we need go to William Walsh. Sensibility, he says, is . . . that special combination of thought, feeling, value and assumption, that particular flavor of taste and sentiment, that characteristic mode of action which reveal the nuance and crystallize the tone and temper of a literature. In literature... we find... a rich complex of 'beliefs,' 'the picked experience of the finest minds,' the great writer's intricate apprehension of reality—'the idea', as Henry James, said,

'which deeply, lurks in any vision prompted by life.' [63/1]

Indian sensibility cannot be described nor grasped in one sentence. It is a multilayered structure, multi-dimensional in nature, whose real meaning can be deciphered only by reference to the Indian scriptures. This is a set of values, an amalgamation of myriad thoughts of the *Vedas*, the *Vedana*, , the *Gita*, and several other time-tested books which form the Indian heritage.

The sensibility of India is the stream of social consciousness flowing along time from its own distinct origin, gaining in new elements but never forgoing the traces of the past, adding more colours and lines to the existing pattern. There may be, nonetheless,



constant recognition of it to incorporate changes without loss of over-all identical features. What we call tradition is the history of this national sensibility that is ever the same though ever newer forms of cultural expression keep on rising.

According to Indian thought, which is the base of Indian sensibility, man is the most fortunate species in this creation, not because he is the measure of everything, as is usually understood in the western tradition, but because he is the most superior being in the sense that he is not only self-conscious, but also has the potency to awaken and enlighten his consciousness from higher to further higher levels of existence.

In Indian perspective, human existence encompasses three levels of perception; individual consciousness, society, and value, both actual as well as an ideal. At the individual level, we have to understand a human being as a conscious agent, at the social level we have to bring in various aspects of his individuality and other obligations, while at the valuation level we have to discuss his emotional pursuits and the ultimate goal of life. Indian philosophical thought is deeply rooted in Vedic sources where we find eternal human quest to comprehend the real essence of its existence. The *Vedas* pose many challenges from this point of view, dealing with reality in an extra-ordinary, indirect and suggestive manner rather than in an ordinary, direct and descriptive manner. At the same time they

offer some new opening or a clue to any one side of our nature for understanding the full scope of our existence.

In the Indian worldview, a holistic and integrated approach towards life has to be adopted according to which both individual and society are intrinsically related ensuring the growth of the individual horizontally as well as vertically. It is true that the Indian thought emphasizes the inner transformation of man rather than any external or socialized style in his personality but at the same time it has to be emphasized that individual progress cannot take place in isolation; rather it is to be achieved while living through its interaction with other beings, human as well as non-human.

The most striking feature of Indian mode of thinking is the underlying Vedic view of man's inherent moral and spiritual consciousness. Indian philosophy has been mainly rooted in the spiritual urge and has always been value-oriented, spiritual freedom being its supreme goal. This spiritual freedom signifies eternal perfection, infinite existence and pure bliss. Philosophy in India, as a matter of fact, is not treated as an intellectual exercise or a view of life alone; it is rather seriously pursued as a way of life. It is thus that ethics was and is the warp and woof of Indian philosophy, not in the form of theories or doctrines, but in the form of ideals and values to be cherished and followed by each and everyone, desirous of an ascent in life.



It must be noticed that the word *dharma* when used in the context of one's self does not make for a distinction between the "ought" and the "can" of moral life. What a man "ought" to do is to base his life on the ideals of the good of society and the need for the attainment of *moksa* or freedom. The three pathways stipulated for the realization of *moksa* are usually termed *yogas*. The word *yoga* means "to bind". These pathways, says Chennakesavan "bind man to God on the one hand and on the other release him from the bondage of the world" (212/2). *Karma yoga* is the ethical path where man cultivates the ideal of the greatest happiness of the greatest number and achieves selflessness, to such a degree that he is able to renounce the entangling activities and to understand the true nature of freedom. *Bhakti yoga* requires man not only to act selflessly, but also to forget himself in complete dependence on God. It is very difficult to say to God! "Let thy will prevail and not mine." The presence of even the slightest egoism would negate such a complete surrender. Man being what he is, it can be said that it is almost impossible to be a true bhakta or a devotee. *Jnana yoga* or the path of knowledge requires man to devote himself to true knowledge and to concentrate on realizing such knowledge in this life. A true knowledge of things

reveals the impermanence and ineffectualness of the things of this world, and the permanency of the Ultimate Reality. In the

other two paths, man has the solace of either doing his duty or depending on using his discriminative knowledge, finds out that there is nothing real and worthwhile outside *Brahman*. This is perhaps the most difficult path of all (Chennakesavan 213).

While we thus grade the paths, we must notice that each path includes the other as a platform. To act, one must know the situation and be engrossed in the act. To love one must know through and through the object of love and be willing to dedicate all one's actions to that one object of love. To know, the life of a person must be purified, which involves ethical behavior. Thus each pathway involves the other to a greater or lesser degree.

The *Vedas* exhibit a definite outlook towards life, according to which a human being is born mortal but can and should strive for immortality. A person's mortality refers to his body and its limited earthly existence only, while his soul is immortal. In fact, in Vedic view, all human beings are the children of immortality and inherit the celestial regions of gods.

The *Vedas*, as exemplifying the chief strains of Indian sensibility, exhort man to rise above the earthly existence and reach up to the divine. For man is not to be satisfied with mere survival, but has to have an incessant yearning to grow further and



develop higher. According to Vedic philosophy, the germane form of all ethical concepts is rooted in the source of goodwill. Not only is the knowledge of good as an idea or the performance of good as an action important, but the mental bent, intention or will also should be pure; only then can one follow the path of righteousness and truthfulness. Since the inner will or desire is the first seed of mental aspiration which motivates one to act, the goodness of mind is very crucial. According to the Veda, true morality lies in the spring of action, that is the will in the mind or the inner spirit of one's being.

Along with the *Vedas*, Indian sensibility is governed and shaped by the holy *Gita*. The teachings of Lord Krishna to Arjuna have always been a source of inspiration and life-governing impulses. The *Gita* declares that men, "caught in the meshes of delusion, self-conceited, stubborn, filled with haughtiness, purse-proud, utterly disregard all rules, and hate God and his own fellowmen. The unrestricted antisocial use of one's freedom is bondage" (Nagaraja 87). This has become an indispensable part of Indian sensibility.

The dualistic system of Samkhya postulates that both *Prakrti*, the primordial matter, and *Purusa*, the primal soul, are real. *Purusa* means one who is bound by the body. *Purusa* is the consciousness in the body. The individual self is not the body, or the mind. It is that which knows, making use of the body and the mind. But the soul is not the active

principle in knowledge. It is at the receiving end only. It is also the enjoyer, but not the doer of actions.

While *Prakrti* is the active agent in all knowledge processes, the *Purusa* is the passive principle. The existence of this *Purusa* is established by reason. Just as reasons are given for the establishment of *Prakrti*, so also reasons are given to establish the existence of *Purusa*. (Chennakesavan 112).

The Indian sensibility, after the manner of the *Gita*, has refreshingly reinterpreted the paths of Activism and Contemplation. The path of renunciation does not abandon activity but preserves the spirit of renunciation. Activity, to be free, must leave no room for selfish impulse. The *Gita* insists on the performance of one's duty with detachment from the concerns of the fruit of the action. This synthesis is given wide and spectacular currency by the contemporary Indian thinkers in their schemes of reconstruction of the Hindu moral ideals.

The Indian mind, thus, has its own sensibility, its own peculiar (even if these are common to some other minds) habits and approaches to life's problems, that is to say: positive attitude towards the world, cosmic and spiritualistic outlook, integral and synthetic view, reconciliation of theism and



absolutism, new approaches to salvation, dynamism, openness and catholicity, and humanistic tendencies.

Among the contemporary Indian English novelists, it is Arun Joshi who has highlighted most effectively some of the eternal metaphysical and ethical questions. Any Indian novelist who does so can hardly avoid the deep and ever-lasting impact of the *Gita*, the *Vedas*, and the *Vedantas* on Indian life and thought. O. P. Mathur maintains: In Arun Joshi's case, this impact is not casual or coincidental: it seems to form the philosophical and ethical fabric of some of his major works (26/3).

Against the visible sources like *Veda* and *Gita*, there are invisible forces—like one's family, acquaintances, the books one reads and the movies one watches, and add in ways, small and big, towards the making of the mental furniture of a person. One's sensibility is a product as much of what he experiences silently as it is of direct influences like the books he reads; rather, the invisible, unidentifiable factors play bigger role in forming the soil from out of which emerge his emotions, feelings, thoughts, and ideas. And when he writes his fiction, it is these that he translates into words. Arun Joshi's sensibility, likewise, is, thus, less a construction of his readings and more a product of his silent observation of what people think and do, and so is more tangible and active and real.

Surprisingly, Arun Joshi does not

make a display-show of his Indian wares. His novels singularly avoid Sanskrit words. *The City and the River* calls Sanskrit as “the forgotten languages” (9), as the ancient language that no one understood” (10). He sparingly uses even Hindi words in his novels. Surely, there is no need to use Indian words if the situation does not demand it, and no hesitation in using them if the situation demands it. One may have “Indian” sensibility without being Indian, and one may show his Indian sensibility without using Indian words. Not that Joshi does not use words from Hindi, or quotes from *Gita* and Upanishads or cites Sri Aurobindo, Vivekanand, Gandhi and others. His sensibility is Indian; his language is English. This, however, is true that he amply shows that the evils of materialism and corruptions of commercialism can best be answered by the spiritual lessons Indian offers.

Right from its very first expression by Sake Deen Mahomed (*The Travels of Deen Mahomed*, 1793) and moving on with Henry Derozio's first volume of poems in English, in 1827, to Krishna Chandra Chatterjee's first play in English (*The Persecuted*, 1831), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's first novel in English (*Rajmohan's Wife*, 1864), Indian literature in English has kept its roots firmly planted in the Indian soil. English has really become our most significant language; all the cries made by other linguistic groups, notwithstanding, it is the only language to have brought world recognition to the Indian literature, winning nearly every important

literary award – from Nobel Prize (Tagore, 1913), to Booker McConnell Prize (Salman Rushdie, 1981), though, ironically, as an aside, the term Indian literature was coined first by Wilhelm von Schlegel, in 1823, as a synonym of Sanskrit literature. However, as Subramania Bharti says, India speaking in 18 languages or more, articulates “one *chintana*” (Umashankar Joshi, 9), and that *chintana* (thinking, sensibility) is an eclectic sensibility based, in our myths, puranas, multifarious religious books and social concerns. This sensibility saturates the thinking patterns of Arun Joshi.

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