



Studying the Idea of Evil and Redemption in Arun Joshi's 'The Apprentice'

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Abstract

Arun Joshi focuses on depicting both the complex predicament of contemporary man and the helplessness of human relationships which leave vacuity and insignificance in the lives of his characters. He is passionately concerned with the dilemma of human loneliness and with the characters who are highly alienated. In his search and attempt to introduce new themes in his fiction, Joshi has "renounced the outer world in favour of the inner man" and has engaged himself in "a search for the essence of human being" (Verghese 124-125). Dr. Faustus is the archetypal prototype of the modern man, and this novel appears to be a near perfect statement on man dabbling in evil and then, unlike the Marlovian protagonist, recanting, and reverting to find redemption. This study proposes to bring out Arun Joshi's idea of evil and how the protagonist of 'The Apprentice' seeks atonement.

Keywords: Faustus, Marlow, Arun Joshi, existential, evil, redemption

Introduction

Like Albert Camus, a renowned existentialist, Joshi addresses himself to the segregation of contemporary man in an alien world and the estrangement of an individual from himself, the society and the culture. He unravels the different phases of crisis in modern man's life. The protagonists of all his novels are continually engaged in searching for meaning of life. The central image in all his novels is that of a 'foreigner'. Like Camus, he adopts interior monologue to bring out the essential characteristics of his protagonists. Devinder Mohan remarks that "Joshi invents interior speech of labyrinthine darkness, a linguistic transformation of the inner subjectivity beneath the Indian and American cultural structures. The authorial voice, in a very special way, becomes the voice of naturalistic man which Joshi handles with

aesthetic mediation between American and Indian ethnicity (p.17).

Arun Joshi tries hard to tackle the dilemma of the evolution of the human personality in a world that is inconsistent with the people in it. He finds that self alienation can affect an individual worse than social alienation and this is a great obstacle in the path of an individual's mental and psychic development. His characters are seekers of meaning in the absurdity of life and remain hopelessly lost, lonely hunters gaining little or nothing at the end. All his protagonists, Jasbir Jain opines, are "men engaged in the meaning of life" (p. 52), men who have lost their spiritual moorings.

Arun Joshi's Protagonist and his Embattled World

In *The Apprentice* (1974), Joshi gives a no-holds barred picture of a young government



servant's descent into careerism and corruption. Possibly, more than any other Indian novel, *The Apprentice* mixes fact with fiction. Joshi here adopts a direct approach to the corruption of our civilized world, more than he had done in his earlier attempts. This may be a merit as well as a drawback of the novel in that it says all that a treatise on the current social and political scene in the country can and yet it reads like a novel. What is most striking in the novel is its relevance for the modern Indian reader. C.N. Srinath asserts that "it is the tale of a 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 career—in short, with a deep awareness of the conflicts between life and living. The sadness of the tale lies in the inevitable suction of such young men like Ratan Rathor, the narrator of the tale, into the whirlpool that our society is (p. 203).

Like the hero of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, who discards the civilized world and its artificialities in an attempt to understand life and to seek freedom and fulfillment, the hero of *The Apprentice* too tries to understand life, its processes and his own place therein. But whereas for that aim, Billy Biswas chooses to exile himself from civilization into the mysteries of life, Ratan Rathor remains deeply rooted in the corrupt and hypocritical practices of the present day Indian society. He undergoes "some moral degradation and gets utterly unscrupulous" (Prasad 1985, p.111) and finds a major portion of his life, remaining 'neck-deep' in the midst of corruption and only very late realizes that there can still be some hope of his redemption through repentance. It is only after this realization dawns upon him that he decides to make himself an apprentice to the task of "learning to be of use" (p. 207). He tries to secure strength in "spiritual humility which

prompts him to seek for the second time a basis for action . . . [by] polishing the shoes of the congregation at a temple door (Saraiya, p. 13). He may also be seen as "a practical man whose idealism is shattered by the corruption in society" (Vachaspati Dwivedi, p.80). Siddharth Sharma finds the novel commenting upon "the inevitability of evil boomeranging on the evil doer" (p. 57).

As in *The Foreigner*, Joshi, here also, celebrates "the triumph and excitement of humanism" and carries "vibrant pulsations of complacent humanistic ardour" (Abraham, p. 31). In fact, it is not the story of Ratan Rathor alone but of every one of us who are partners in the rampant corruption we bemoan. With an effective narrative technique, the novel holds our interest though it is a monologue without any characters except the Brigadier. There is an imaginary companion whom the narrator addresses now and then to break the monotony. The use of past tense, the story being told in retrospect, lends a peculiar objectivity to the tone of the narration.

The narrator is the apprentice who turns a fake, a sham, a corrupt official and an exhausted family man. As an official in the government, and having climbed up the ladder of bureaucracy in the time-honoured manner of pleasing the boss by being docile and even servile, the apprentice makes a mark officially but his inside gets hollow, moth-eaten. He loses both his personality and identity. The novel, in a way, is the record of how he gets enmeshed in the web of corruption and how he extricates out of it. It is a record of how Faustus-like he pawns his soul and, how, unlike the Malvolian hero, he manages to salvage it in atonement.

In sheer boredom, the apprentice yields to some tempting offers of bribery in passing



defective war material during the Chinese invasion, not knowing the grievous consequences it might lead to. And when he comes to know of the blatant error he has made and how a direct victim of his act happens to be his close friend, the Brigadier in the novel, he is horrified at the atrocity of his whole complicity.

As a contrast to what he is and what he does is his father's brave act in not submitting to the British but voluntarily exposing his chest to the British guns which ruthlessly shoot him down. He quite frequently recollects that act and feels his woeful inadequacy in living up to his father's image. Corruption at various levels and of different kinds that we notice in society is told in astounding candour and candid manner. Though the novel is littered with the dark side of the apprentice's public life, the readers get some stray glimpses into the innocent private life of his early days: "There were other things that we did, things that young men do, things without meaning, except the meaning they acquire when youth is spent. What meaning is there in cycling ten miles, towards the setting sun, your hand on another man's shoulder or swimming across a river before dawn or going to village fairs to look at the girls . . . or laughing at nothing until tears roll down your cheeks. What meaning is there in all these unless it is the meaning of youth itself" (p. 17).

Despite the sheer joy of youthful experience we notice a tragic undercurrent in the tone indicative of the loss of innocence. Things of no consequence gain significance only in retrospect.

What the apprentice is now bent upon is his bright future and a successful and lucrative career. We see that he is full of admiration for the superintendent who coaches him to go up

the ladder of Government service "It was the skill in manoeuvre that mattered. Which more or less was an end in itself." [p. 53]

Bringing a shrewd insight into the ways of bureaucracy, the passage maintains an almost metaphysical stance in depicting its amoral operation. It is a deftness that is perilously close to virtuosity but is saved by the author's sense of the concrete and his eye on situation and character. What might have been a moral fall seems to have been averted by a sense of shame that one notices in the apprentice who shows a remarkable self-awareness in ruthlessly exposing his over-subtleties, fads, preoccupations, self-deceptions, ego and the boredom of the dark phase of his life. It is this along with his present strength to laugh at his meaningless past that gives a kind of complexity to the portrait of Ratan. The episode of his article on 'Crisis of Character' which he now calls 'a comic document' is quite revealing. The whole account is rendered by the narrator with tongue-in-cheek as we are told:

I sent the article to many newspapers but none of them published it. This did not prevent me from having it cyclostyled and distributed among a large number of my friends. I also presented it in the form of a lecture to a couple of Associations in our area. (p. 77).

What one notices here is not hypocrisy, for there is also an element of stupid sincerity, but the lack of drive or moral courage to practice what he preaches.

Immediately after this episode we witness the stark statement that he accepted a bribe—not because of any need but for reasons

which defy a simple and straight explanation. The whole business of living is so much muddled and has become a whirlpool of confusing values, contradictions and enigmas that he fails to comprehend the meaning of such acts, exposing him to a moral dilemma:

What was right? What was wrong? No one seemed to know. Or maybe they *knew*, but when it came to practice no one seemed to be sure whether what was right was practicable. That was where the rub lay.... And enveloping all this, a fog beyond the fog, were words. Like today. Words, words, words. Speeches, editorials, resolutions, handouts, slogans, posters, banners, proceedings of the numerous assemblies . . . It was not the pros and cons of a case that we weighed as we weighed the men behind them. And the men were weighed in Money or Power. It soon became apparent to me that those who had neither were worthless (p. 48-49).

This initial restlessness leads to apathy and even cunning as we notice the gradual change coming over the apprentice. Of course this has meant inner corrosion which is also pathetic and even tragic because of the pervasive nature of the epidemic that finally turns millions into nullities.

The novel is the story of the social sickness and sufferings of Ratan Rathor. As a village boy Ratan had considered life to be a beautiful sacrifice but the hardships of his life bring out a sense of insecurity in him. He is nervous for getting a job when he does not find it in the village. In order to be distinguished

from other village boys like the brigadier, he goes to Delhi in search of job, meets all his friends and relatives but finally suffers privation. He wants nothing more than a job to earn his livelihood. He strives hard but is rejected everywhere. Though educated, polished, intelligent and cultured, he wanders from office to office in search of job. Here his deeply rooted rural mindset under goes a major change. He narrates:

I had become, at the age of twenty-one hypocrite and a liar, in short, a sham. . . . From morning till night I told more lies than truths. I had become a master faker (128).

His breakdown of faith and nobility, justice and hard labour, are solved when a steno friend helps him get a job as an office assistant, where he deals with the purchase of war-materials. Here he is ready to depart from his father's ideals. There is nothing idealistic or heroic about him. He longs for a career which his father disliked. With all alertness and competence he pleases his Superintendent. A long series of compromises corrodes his finer instincts. He is restless, and sleepless is unable to ignore the making of his career and is terrified by the uncertainties of life. Corruption takes hold of him and erases whatever his father might have passed on. He recounts: "I am thick-skin now, a thick-skin and a wash out but, believe me, my friend, I too have had thoughts such as these, but what was to be done? One had to live. And, to live, one had to make a living. And, how was a living to be made except through careers" (p. 41).

Thus, we find that at every shift in his life Ratan Rathor has a deviating tendency but this deviation from the ideals torments him. He has to suppress the voice of his soul. Falsity,



hypocrisy and corruption are the things which teach him to be a faker. The Western culture teaches him to disbelieve God and God's existence.

The Cutting Edge of Existence: The Dilemma

The tone of the tale fluctuates in consonance with the situation that crops up in a chronological way to give the work the credibility of a story. The contrast between the earlier Ratan, the apprentice who has hitched his wagon to the star of success and Ratan, the apprentice who has passed through the dark night of soul, is brought out in the anger, remorse and intense suffering that one feels in the tone of the narrative.

The readers who are more concerned about the metaphysical concerns and speculations of the novelist, find that these are conspicuously absent in the novel, yet the concerns are related. Hari Mohan Prasad states that Joshi "develops a philosophy that works in practical life and is an offshoot of the doctrine of *Karma*" (p. 43). This is a way of vivifying the desiccated but invaluable Upanisadic tradition and making it savoury to the present. The solution is not far away from the spiritual limits. Had it been otherwise, Ratan could well have chosen a different place to begin his apprenticeship other than the doorway of the temple. Abraham believes that "he is an apprentice to God as much as to men. He is just beginning his lessons from God. As a beginner, he has to start at the doorway alone when the congregation leaves. Ratan's authentic self is an integral part of a higher realm to the centre of which he seems to be moving (Abraham, p. 44).

The character of the Brigadier is presented to highlight in fictional terms, the

victimization of the innocent in a corrupt society. The terrible predicament of the Brigadier, who has paid a heavy price for no fault of his and who is stunned and nearly paralyzed in having to face a court-martial on a charge of desertion on the battlefield, has direct relation to Ratan's bribe. The police officer who meets the apprentice makes a penetrating enquiry hinting at his grave offence in clearing defective war material which led to the Brigadier's desertion from the battlefield. When the officer for lack of evidence, pleads with him to confess if only to save the Brigadier's life, Ratan bravely walks out mentally resolved to save his friend.

But the way he relaxes, dodges and finally writes out his confession, modifies it instantly and tries to justify his act by convincing himself of his 'innocence' and finally pocketing the letter forever shows his efforts to glaze his cowardice with something that passes for martyrdom and innocence by turns. The Brigadier could not, however, wait for his confession and kills himself. So Ratan, with a deeply troubled conscience, goes to Himmat Singh (who had bribed him at the instance of the higher authorities) to avenge his friend's death but soon realizes the absurdity of the whole thing and reflects: "that is a terrible sensation, my friend—may God preserve you from it—the realisation that one's life has been a total waste, a great mistake; without purpose, without results. There are many sorrows in the world but there is nothing in the three worlds to match the sorrow of a wasted life. All else, thoughts of revenge, of pleasure, of pain pale before it, are made pointless" (p. 194).

Ratan's sense of the futility of it all scalds him inwardly and leaves him so exhausted that he tells his listener most pathetically: "Sso you see, my friend, here I am, a man without honour, a man without



shame. Perhaps a man of our times. . . . How do I know life has purpose? Actually, I don't. And, quite honestly mine is not the mind that can grasp such questions. But let me tell you something that a colleague of mine used to say. Life is a zero, he would say, and, he would add, you can take nothing away from a zero. . . . I have begun to see a flaw in the argument. You see, you can take things out of a zero. You can make it negative. . . . Life might well be a zero, for all I know, but it seems to me that it need not be negative. And it becomes negative when you take out of it your sense of shame, your honour" (p. 204-205).

That Ratan Rathor, who is not an intellectual like Sindi or Billy but an ordinary man, should appreciate the distinction between zero as negative and, implicitly, zero as positive speaks for the character's development. And to make it credible, the subtle distinction is put in the mouth of a colleague. He is naturally amused now by some of the pet illusions that mankind nurses and is reminded of the Pujari who used to retort when teased about his profession as waste of time and as chanting mere mumbo-jumbo, doing nobody any good:

I am here to be of use. And one thing I can do, the only thing that I have been taught to do is to shout this mumbo-jumbo . . . (203).

The Emerging Vision: Humanism and Religion as the Saving Grace

Out of sorrow and humiliation and groping to understand the meaning of life and ready to expiate his sin, Ratan Rathor undergoes the strongest apprenticeship in the world, namely, wiping the shoes of the

congregation sitting on steps outside the temple every morning on his way to the office:

I stand at the doorstep and I fold my hands, my hands smelling of leather and I say things. Be good, I tell myself. Be good. Be decent. Be of use. Then I beg forgiveness. Of a large host! My father, my mother, the Brigadier, the unknown dead of the war, of those whom I harmed, with deliberation and with cunning, of all those who have been victims of my cleverness, those whom I could have helped and did not. After this I get into my car and go to office. 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. (p. 206-207).

What is evident is Joshi's compassion, vision of life and sensibility that is nourished by legends and tales of sin and expiation peculiarly Indian. That it is perhaps the most appropriate social comment to appear on the contemporary Indian scene is not to diminish its artistic merit but to admire the handling of tract material within the framework of a novel. The portrayal of Ratan Rathor is an artistic transcript of the self-made man's steep fall in morals in proportion to his meteoric rise in material status. Madhusudan Prasad is not off the mark when he traces the trajectory of his fall as well as the subsequent rise in his own reckoning: "he is simultaneously a product and a victim of the decadent social values that gave



a fillip to his ambition and rendered him deaf to the voice of his own conscience. Saddled by the dichotomy in his 'double inheritance', and regretful 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. (p. 60).

Ratan's regret, however, is that his whole life had been a total waste, a great mistake without purpose, without results. He is, thus, a protagonist typical of Arun Joshi in so far as his most sincere effort, however belated, was to be in right relation with his own inner sense of *dharma*.

The technique has a marvelous hold on the material even as the autobiographical retrospective narrative of Ratan Rathor has a compelling urgency in its concern, a ruthless self-introspection and on the whole, a convincing development of the protagonist at the end of the story—all of which save it from the blemishes to which a work of art is prone in its over-insistent preoccupation with social and personal ills of the day. What is so pervasively rampant to us is verbalized and given concrete shape here in a tale that holds us by the neck just as the apprentice himself does to the imaginary companion.

The Apprentice, at the same time, gains its significance more because of the social background of which it is a product for. But that the novelist employs a ruthlessly simple and direct style to expose some aspects of modern Indian society through the life of the narrator in a poignantly confessional tone can disarm even the sternest of his detractors. One wonders at the same time if this social relevance does not limit the artistic scope of the

novel in the sense that it does not raise profound human questions. It is perhaps fair to Arun Joshi to add that the novel overcomes this delimiting factor by hinting at a combination of humanism and religion as the saving grace of mankind, steeped in corruption. Madhusudan Prasad rightly points out that "*The Apprentice* is a striking study of belief in 'karma' and purification of the soul, and it commends the abiding values of humility and self-purification in human life (p. 60).

The Quest for a New Ethics of Living

The readers find that the quest for a definite meaning and direction in one's life has been Joshi's primary preoccupation. In *The Foreigner*, he had tried to dramatize the internal conflicts of the Khemkhas which are conflicts that arise out of a quest for identity in an apparently superficial urban India. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Billy, the product of the upper-class India, sought refuge in the dark interior forests of Northern India and the tribal woman Bilasia in his search of mental peace. In *The Apprentice*, the narrator, who is again a product of the mechanical, urban India, tries to regain composure by confessing his fall to a young N. C. C. cadet on the Republic day.

It is interesting to note that whereas Joshi had dedicated *Billy Biswas* to his father, he dedicates *The Apprentice* to his mother. Ratan, as a child of double inheritance, imbibes from his father a sense of idealism and inheres from his mother an inclination towards worldly pursuits. The two have to be balanced: the western spirit of propagating one's material self has to have the Hindu platform of selflessness. This Ratan is able to effect when he takes the course *Bhakti* as prescribed in *Bahagvadgita*. He recognizes that soul's purification lies not in dogmas or rituals but in



abnegating oneself before God. His polishing of the shoes at the temple door signifies true and total surrender to God.

All his life, Ratan had focused on material gains. Now, at the end, having realized the futility of chasing tinsel glory, he turns Godwards, turns an apprentice : Not without reason, the word ‘apprentice’ appears on the last but one page of the novel. It is never too late to mend, so goes the saying. Ratan shows it and lives it when he says: “...I am learning to be of use. I know it is late in the day. But one must try and not lose heart, not yield, at any cost, to despair” (143).

In full calm does Ratan promise to make his new beginning. Suffering has ennobled him, chastened him. He is ready to make real contribution to the society. We may conclude this discussion with the pious words of Swami Vivekanand:

Real activity, which is the goal of Vedanta, is combined with eternal calmness which cannot be ruffled; balance of mind which is never disturbed, whatever happens. And we all know from our experience in life that that is the best attitude for work (p. 112).

Ratan’s course of life now meets the *Bhakti* tradition as laid down in *Gita*. He undergoes expiation having realized that that is the way to salvation. His polishing the shoes removes the filth in the soul. In full humility, he seeks God’s hand upon him. In full confessional tone, he seeks everyone to forgive him :

I beg forgiveness. Of a large host: my father, my mother, the

Brigadier, the unknown dead of the war, of those whom I harmed, with deliberation and with cunning, of all those who have been the victims of my cleverness, those whom I could have helped and did not (p. 148-149).

The Salvation: The Indian Sensibility

The social context of the individual plight imparts a poignantly Indian ambience to *The Apprentice*. Contrary to popular assumptions, Indian’s past and its religion did not negate life. If anything they emphasize a detached, yet vital participation in the moment, with an enlightened knowledge of the self, and with a sense of self-abnegation. Selfish possessions and individual avarice lead to human misery, which can be expiated only through the virtues of friendliness and compassion. The path of selfless devotion and renunciation alone can propagate the spiritual well being and joy of all the people, An individual must find his life in the lives of others for the ultimate good. On the other hand, grief, lamentation, mental agony, sorrow and anxiety arise and originate from attachment. *The Apprentice* also suggests this prophetic message. Ratan finally realizes that one cannot live for oneself because no human act is performed in isolation and without consequence. Each act should be performed with a sense of responsibility. 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. Symbolically he starts at the lowest—“dusting the shoes of the congregation outside the temple every morning on his way to the office. . . . He learns the lesson of humility. He seeks fulfilment in this symbolic act” (Reddy 222). He feels that the only sustaining basis for action is to be of use to others "without vanity

and without expectations and also without cleverness." (143) He derives a meaningful consolation when he learns to associate himself with the society, even in a rudimentary manner.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion reveals that the novel ends on a positive note. The faith resurges itself in the belief that to be meaningful life has to be lived for others. Man must act as a torch-bearer for his fellowmen. Joshi reasserts the need of the Buddhist ideal of negating the selfishness and postulates that for true happiness, one must do what one can do without vanity and expectations, as "whatever you do touches someone somewhere" (p.143).

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