Literature Review

Arun Joshi adds a new dimension to the genre of Indian Fiction in English by introducing the theme of alienation in his novels. His fictional world is characterised by the alienation of the individual, shown through a crisis of the self in an emotionally disturbed environment. He is acclaimed for his absorbing novels in which French existentialism coexisted and fused with meditations based on the Bhagvad Gita. A bridge between two worlds and cultures, not necessarily the East and the West, his career followed an ascending line that eventually led him to being awarded the Sahitya Academy Award, India’s most prestigious literary honour. Arun Joshi’s novels, from The Foreigner to The City and River are full of darkness, the darkness of the identity, conflict and personal sufferings. Ultimately there is rejuvenation and elevation from the shadow of the darkness by the arrival of the light in the form of knowledge.

To understand and analyse the novels of Arun Joshi, it is worthwhile to have a subjective understanding of the novels rather than that of the objective reality that shaped the protagonist. This introductory chapter is an attempt to look at the novels of Arun Joshi from various angles. For this purpose, the Chapter has been divided into various parts to place the issue of “identity” in a larger context.

Joshi’s first novel, The Foreigner (1993), depicts the alienation of the protagonist Sindi Oberoi and explores his anguished consciousness of being alienated from the conventions and rituals of his society. This anguish and alienation later on manifest themselves as the reasons for the identity conflict and main causes of the meaninglessness of his life.

Sindi Oberoi was born in Kenya of an English mother and an Indian father. Though his father was an Indian, yet he could hardly call himself a Hindu. As if elaborating the point, he candidly confesses: “Anyway I can’t really be called a Hindu. My mother was English and my father, I am told, a sceptic. That doesn’t seem like a good beginning for a Hindu, does it.”

Sindi remains a foreigner whether he is in London, Boston, or Delhi. He cannot think of himself as belonging to any country in particular and wonders: “did I belong to the world?” (55). But “the sense of foreignness that afflicts him and makes him alienated from others is not geographical, as it might appear on the surface, but that of his soul. Accordingly Sindi remarks:

“Somebody had begotten me without a purpose and so far I had lived without a purpose, unless you could call the search for peace a purpose. Perhaps I felt like that, because I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it
have made if I had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter! It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner” (55).

This remark of his clearly evinces that he is experiencing rootlessness and alienation that result into the identity crisis.

Living in Kenya, London and Boston, he undergoes various changes through personal experiences. While in Kenya, he contemplates suicide, and when he comes to London, the same despair remains with him. A girl, Anna, seeks to rediscover her lost youth, and lives for him, but in response he gives her nothing and shows his liking for Kathy. Eventually Kathy abandons him. The broken relationship disturbs him, and in America he is “afraid of getting involved” (53) with June Blyth, an American girl.

Sindi’s parentage and early life made him a nowhere man. He cultivates a sense of detachment to overcome his painful past, which includes “Being a product of hybrid culture”. He is aware of his rootlessness. He wants to love June but is afraid of involvement and marriage. Hence he remarked: “I was afraid of possessing anybody and I was afraid of being possessed, and marriage meant both” (91).

The mystery of human existence terrifies him when he comes to know about the death of June due to an abortion. Babu’s death taught him only half the lesson, but he learns the remaining half when he comes to know about the death of June. “Consequently, he looks upon the world as a heap of crumbled illusions where nothing is real and permanent” (94).

The nausea Sindi feels in his early days keeps him restless throughout life. He “sees no purpose in life and he finds himself living without a purpose” (97). This sickness remains with him even after he joins London University. He does well in the examinations, but he gets tired and bored with the lectures which, according to him, lack relevance to life. Sindi resembles T. S. Eliot’s “Hollow Men” and “J. Alfred Prufrock”. Lightly does Tapan Kumar Ghosh hold that: “like T. S. Eliot’s straw men, he ekes out an existence which is no better than death in life.” Like Prufrock measuring out his life “with coffee spoons”, Sindi too contemplates:

“My fifth Christmas on these alien shores. And yet all shores are alien when you don’t belong anywhere. Twenty fifth Christmas on this planet, twenty five years largely wasted in search of wrong things in wrong places. Twenty five years gone in search of peace, and what did I have to show for achievements; a ten stone
body that had to be fed four times of a day, twenty eight times a week. This was the sum of a lifetime of striving” (96).

Also like Prufrock, he is unable to understand himself or his life. He too is lonely, all alone in the wild world. Although an Indian by birth, Sindi feels himself to be an outsider even in India. Shaila, Babu’s sister, tries to understand him but she too remarks: “You are still a foreigner, you don’t belong here” (122). There is intense sadness in Sindi which those who come into contact with him, June in America, Sheila, Mr. Khemkar in India, can feel in the very presence of the man. This he tries to explain to Mr. Khemka in the following manner:

You had a clear cut system of morality, a caste system that laid down all you had to do. You had a God; you had roots in the soil you lived upon. Look at me. I have no roots. I have no system of morality. What does it mean to me if you call me an immoral man? I have no reason to be one thing or another. You ask me why I am not ambitious; well, I have no reason to be. Come to think of it I don’t even have a reason to live! (118).

Thus, in The Foreigner, Joshi depicts the alienation of the protagonist Sindi Oberoi. It results into the identity conflict but the post-spiritualism gives him the salvation, an identity, and a meaning to his life. Besides, Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist of his debut novel The Foreigner, brings back to life many of the experiences encountered in his author’s youth.

While in all Joshi’s novels characters feel the need to confess their wrongs at one time or another, The Apprentice makes the confessional motif the focal point of the work. It is no surprise; therefore, that Camus’s The Fall is the text scholars generally tend to compare to Joshi’s third literary work. It is surely a novel that stands apart in the author’s literary output; of all his books, in fact, The Apprentice is the one that describe the details of Indian society and Indian history—centred as it is on the episodes gravitating around the Indo-Chinese conflict. It is narrated in spicy Indian English by the central character, Ratan Rathor.

The fictional technique adopted by Arun Joshi is another important element that contributes to the uniqueness of The Apprentice. So, that the novel has sometimes been tagged as a fictional experiment. Very ingenuously and with excellent oratorical skill, Ratan pours out the events of his life to a listener, whose name one never learns. Of this imaginary dialogue, however, Joshi brings to the text only the narrator’s speech and not his interlocutor’s, leaving the reader with the impression of a monologue. But, though apparently mute in the text, the listener
is extremely active in oiling the mechanisms of the conversation with Ratan. In fact, Joshi’s secret is that the interlocutor is kept well hidden in the shades of discourse. As the story unfolds, one learns that he is young, well-mannered, patient, idealistic, and proud of being a National Cadet. He pays great attention to every detail of the story he is being told. Therefore, he is able to help Ratan to find the thread of his thoughts again every time the narrator’s unavoidable digressions lead him to forget the starting point of his tale. His questions are wise and sharp and he is even said to take on the role of the inquisitor. However, his esteem for Ratan is so high that he does not hesitate to put all his other chores aside. In short, he is the ideal listener.

On the other hand, Ratan is the ideal orator, who needs a public to fully achieve his goal. One knows very little of his present situation until nearly the end of the novel, when his predicament is fully exposed. In the meantime, however, he grips the reader’s attention, thanks to his brilliant use of a variety of rhetorical devices. Sentimental, self-cantered, as much a prisoner of his own telling as is his listener/reader (if not more so), an astute orator-deceiver; he is the one who, for instance, humbly declares: “Let me not, however, get on the pulpit again. I have not the right” (102), while knowing full well that he would not go on was he not relentlessly in a commanding position. Ratan Rathor is a little past middle age, talks with the self-confidence of an experienced man, and is educated, sensible and extremely intelligent.

‘The Strange Case of Billy Biswas’ is the story of a young, rich, America-educated Indian who ends up in the wilderness of central India living as a semi-naked “tribal” seeking a meaning to things above and beyond all that everyday civilization can provide. A key to Joshi’s whole intent can be found in the narrator’s realisation that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood.

The City and the River, Joshi’s last novel, came out some ten years after The Last Labyrinth, a considerable span of time if one takes into consideration that the novelist took only a little more than a decade to publish his other four novels, a collection of short stories and a book illustrating the history of the philanthropic institution he worked for. The City and the River, the city is not the Delhi or the Bombay Joshi has elsewhere described so concretely but a wholly intangible place, removed from time, where nonetheless a man can be seen wearing jeans. Joshi, in his search for a way to describe the meaning of things, has now come to a world akin to those of science fiction or perhaps to the mystical poetry of Blake writing of “Golgonooza the spiritual Fourfold London eternal.” But all the while there are digs or sly hints
at the current ills of Indian society and, by implication, of all societies. And in the final pages, where the wild river sweeps over the whole complex city, there is, again, sounded that faint note of hope. The question is not of success or failure, an old yogi tells his disciple; the question is of trying.

Of all the author’s novels, in fact, The City and the River is the one, which can best be described as “fictional experiment”, despite the fact that this label was used for other works of his, The Apprentice in particular.

The novel records the gloomy story that the Great Yogeshwara recounts to a disciple, the Nameless One, in order to explain who he is. In it too, Joshi makes use of the same device of one-sided dialogue that he employed in The Apprentice, where Ratan emptied his conscience to the National Cadet. Different from the former novel, however, the teller’s detachment from the story, due in part to the fact that he is now a witness of the events rather than the protagonist, runs the risk of mirroring the author’s attitude. As a consequence, the narrative fails to grip the reader’s attention and the critical reception it was given was lukewarm. Following the vogue of Midnight’s Children, The City and the River tries to exhume the legends of ancient Indian epics - chiefly the Upanishads, in which an old sage teaches a lesson of life to a talented disciple--and incorporate them within a postmodern structure and significance. As is already evident in the title, the book emphasises two separate and hostile worlds, another interpretation of the typical dichotomy in Joshi’s vision: the Bombay and the Benares of The Last Labyrinth, the Delhi and the Maikala Hills of The Strange Case of Billy Biswas. The passage from the eighties to the nineties in India, however, marks a significant shift in the taste and orientation of the reading public as far as the fiction written in English was concerned. The arrival, and enormous success, of Rushdie’s novels had caused ferment in what had been a static situation and it is likely that The City and the River embodied a turn in Joshi’s literary output, partly in an effort to exploit the new world.

The story told here is that after a disturbing dream, interpreted as a harbinger of problems by the Astrologer, the Great Master of the City resolves to strengthen his authority. Surrounding himself with a group of ambitious, sycophant ministers, he tries to win the boatmen’s sympathies. They represent the other pole in the city, the poor who still live according to tradition and have made an alliance with the River. Nevertheless, they are not taken in by the
Great Master’s cajoling, who consequently feels the need to employ stronger measures to make the boatmen submit: mass imprisonment, torture, even total destruction.

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Arun Joshi, a writer in the pre-Rushdie era, deals with the mystery and darkness of human mind. His novels, probing into existentialism along with the ethical choices a man has to make, won him huge critical appreciation in India, but remained largely unknown in the West. Psychiatry was the basic interest of Arun Joshi. Most of the writings by Arun Joshi are filled up with his personal experiences right from his youth. Perhaps this is the reason that most of his writings have an array of autobiographical elements.

Arun Joshi is a novelist who, more strongly than most, has brought to his work the detachment from the everyday, while still acknowledging its existence, which is perhaps India’s particular gift to the literature of the world. The rising up into the transcendental is a trait that has increasingly marked out his novels from his first, The Foreigner—where the young hero, after experiencing life and love in America, is, back in Delhi, at last persuaded by a humble office worker that sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved up to The City and the River, which takes place wholly in an imaginary land.

To venture as a writer into such territory, it is necessary to be equipped with the means to make the everyday credible and sharply present. This Joshi was from the start well able to do, as his early short stories, subsequently collected in Survivor, clearly show. “The Gherao” tells simply and effectively of how a young college teacher arrives at maturity when his aged Principal is subjected to that peculiar Indian form of protest action, the gherao, the preventing of a target figure from moving anywhere or receiving any succor.

In The Last Labyrinth, the hero, if that always is not too strong a term for the men Joshi puts at the centre, is a man crying always: “I want! I want!” and not knowing what it is he desires, in some ways a parallel figure to Saul Bellow’s Henderson, the rain king. His search takes him, however, to infinitely old Benares, a city seen as altogether intangible, at once holy and repellent, and to an end lost in a miasma of non-understanding. But the way there is gripping. Joshi writes with a persuasive ease and illuminates the outward scene with telling phrase after telling phrase.
From the above short description of Arun Joshi’s work, one thing is very clear that all the works of the writer revolve around the twin aspects of “conflict” and “self identity” which are interwoven and inseparable. In search of self-identity and to resolve the “conflict” Arun Joshi through his characters resolves the problem by the redemption in various ways. The question is why the author goes for such plot of story and then gives a platform to the character to resolve the agony and suffering of the identity chins and conflict. This point leads to the approach of the subjectivity and suffering where the author himself finds in a perplexed situation which he brings out through the expression of literature. In literature such situation has been mostly painted in the Post-Colonial writings. To analyse the conflict in the novels, the reader has to understand the literary connotations and theoretical aspects of the conflict in literature itself.

A struggle between a character and an outside force is an external conflict. Characters may face several types of outside forces. The outside force may be another character. It may be the character and the community. The outside force may also be forces of nature. For example, a story might describe the main character struggling against the arctic cold.

A struggle that takes place in a character’s mind is called internal conflict. For example, a character may have to decide between right and wrong or between two solutions to a problem. Sometimes, a character must deal with his or her own mixed feelings or emotions.

Conflict is necessary to every story. In short stories, there is usually one major conflict. In longer stories, there could be several conflicts. Conflict adds excitement and suspense to a story. The conflict usually becomes clear in the beginning of a story. As the plot unfolds, the reader starts to wonder what will happen next and how the characters will handle the situation. Many readers enjoy trying to predict the final outcome. The excitement usually builds to a high point, or climax. The climax is the turning point of the story. Something has happened to resolve the conflict.