

Self-Confrontation in Arun Joshi's "The Foreigner"

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Abstract: In his novel The Foreigner Arun Joshi portrays a world where man is confirmed by the self, feeling fractured and fragmented under the burden of many unanswered questions and unresolved dilemmas related to human existence. Living in an era of rampant materialism and individualism, his protagonists are unhappy people. Their material prosperity, academic achievements and hedonistic life-style fail to lead them to state of Peace within and calm around. Sindi Oberoi is lonely, anxious, depressed and dependent person who is painfully aware of the "mess they are in, "and is oppressed with the "sadness of living. " In this struggle for survival he find himself in a wilderness where, as Yeats would describe it,

The things fall apart

The centre cannot hold?

All order is gone out of their life. There is no 'plan, no peace; nothing to keep them within the pattern of everyday living. ⁽¹⁾

Introduction

From detachment to involvement- these words sum up the career of Sindi Oberoi, the chief protagonist of Arun Joshi's first novel, The Foreigner. Sindi's parentage and early broughtup made him the ideal "foreigner, "the man who did not belong anywhere. He was born in Kenya, of an Indian father and an English mother. Both of them died in an air crash near Cairo long ago so that he had no recollection of them and it was as if they never existed for him. He was brought up by his uncle in Kenya who too was dead. He had his early education in Kenya and later in England and finally in America. Thus he was not an African because neither of his parents belonged to Africa. He was not an Englishman because his father was an Indian.

"My novels," say Joshi "are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and myself. If I did not write, I imagine, I would use some other medium to carry on my exploration ⁽²⁾.

And he had not seen India till he was twenty-six. Even then his coming to India was not by deliberate choice. It was decided by the flip of a coin. Thus he was one who did not have roots anywhere in the world.

*I wondered in what way, if any, did I belong to the world that roared
Beneath my apartment window. Somebody had begotten me without*

a purpose and so far I had lived without a purpose... Perhaps I felt like that because I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if he had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter! It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner. My foreignness lay within me and I could't leave myself behind wherever I went. ⁽³⁾

A person so alienated and rootless as Sindi was bound to become cynical, misogynistic and detached. Even as a boy he was tired of living and had contemplated suicide. He himself confessed that he was cynical and exhausted, grown old before his time, weary with his own loneliness. To Sindi nothing ever seemed real or very important. His disgust with his own life is expressed by him in very strong terms. Twenty-five years largely wasted in search of wrong things in wrong places.

All that he had to show was a ten-stone body that had to be fed four times a day, twenty-eight times a week. This was the sum of a lifetime striving. He thought that people existed only for dying. Sindi sums up for Khemka the uprooted arid alienated man of the world- a man with no ambitions, no aim in life, no attachments:

“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 rather than 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.”⁴

It was part of his cynicism and sense of alienation that he was utterly indifferent as to what he studied and what profession he followed. He had a very successful academic career at the London University at Boston where he took a doctorate in mechanical engineering- not that he cared for mechanical engineering a bit more than any other subject; I cared two pins for all the mechanical engineers in the world.

Nowhere is his cynicism more in evidence than in his attitude towards love and marriage. He said to June that he “didn't believe in marriage” because marriage was often a lust for possession than anything else. People got married just as they bought new cars. And then they gobbled each other up. He believed that love that wanted to possess (in marriage) was worse than no love at all. One should be able to love without wanting to possess, otherwise you end up by doing a lot more harm than good.

Sindi made friends with a Catholic priest in Scotland and he had long talks with him. One morning it came to him in a flash. I'll love-whether of thing, or persons, or oneself- was illusion and all pain sprang from this illusion. Love begot greed and attachment, and titled to possession. Sindi was of the view that one should be able to detach oneself from the object of one's love. He

did not want to get involved. Everywhere I turned I saw involvement. He wanted to remain free, detached. In his cynical way he tells June, “ You can love without attachment, without desire. Love is real only when you know that what you love must one day die.”

Sindi, the cynical, alienated young man, belongs to a prolific genre, both in life and literature. “What way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell”- this seems to be the cry of the uprooted angry young men of the modern age. Among the tragic legacies of the British Raj in India is the class of Indian intellectual-anglicized greatly in their outlook and way of life and, at the same time, without their roots fully cut off from the soil of their motherland. They are a completely alienated lot. Sasthi Brata is one such herd abandoned deer. In his “bold and irreverent” autobiography, *My God Died Young*, he has uninhibitedly laid bare the tradition-bound society in India. He is equally critical in his accounts of the West, especially England and America. He complains that British rule in India produced men like himself who can neither feel and identify with his own people nor accept “the glare, the steel-muscle concept of human life in western countries.

The very name of the novel *The Foreigner* compels comparison with other novels with very similar names, Kamala Markandaya’s *Nowhere Man* and Camus’s *The Outsider*. But the contrast with the heroes of the other two novels Srinivas and Monsieur Meursault is obvious. Sindi, as we have seen, progresses from isolation and alienation to involvement. But Srinivas progresses (or retrogresses) in the opposite direction.

Sindi is also different from Camus’s hero, Monsieur Meursault in *The Outsider*. Meursault remains the outsider; detached and indifferent to whatever happens to him, the illness and death of his mother, his imprisonment and even the sentence of death passed on him. At the trial he makes no attempt to save himself, and the sentence of death leaves him quite unmoved. His only wish is that on the day of his execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet him with howls of execration.

While Sindi’s cynicism and detachment are only a thin veneer at the surface interlinked with the in clemencies of life’s weather, detachment is woven inextricably into the very texture of Meursault’s being.

Arun Joshi’s first novel *The Foreigner* is primarily an attempt to explore the hazards of the having structure of existence. True happiness and real salvation are found, it is argued here, in one’s relation with others. Person in communion with person can transcend his narrow, isolated selfhood and realize himself fully in a living dynamic reality.

The Foreigner is a poignant portrayal of Sindi Oberoi’s unhappy, lonely and meaningless existence. His bright career prospects and enviable academic achievements are of no avail because, from all around, he is overwhelmed by a nagging sense of loneliness and the chaos of his being. What oppresses him most is the realization that he is a lonely man who has failed to

see in what way, if any, did he belong to the outside world? His girl friend June Blyth finds him to be a “queer person” because he lacks the spontaneity and warmth of a person who enjoys being with others. She tells him:

*“There is something strange about you, you know, something distant. I’d guess that when people are with you they don’t feel like they’re with a human being... I have a feeling you’d be a foreigner anywhere”.*⁵

He himself knows: “My foreignness lay within me and couldn’t leave myself behind wherever I went.”⁶ A person in the being mode enjoys interacting with people because he can transcend his own egocentricity and is capable of responding spontaneously and productively. He forgets about himself, about his knowledge, the position, the thoughts and ideas he cherishes. His ego does not stand in his way and he can fully respond to the other person and that person’s ideas. Unfortunately, this is not the case with Sindi Oberoi. He has a purely detached, business-like attitude towards life and people. Sitting expressionless, he watches the world go by. June tries to involve him a conversation with a view to knowing more about him. But it makes him uneasy. He feels embarrassed by her personal talk and changes the subject to save himself from the discomfort of talking about himself. He, all along, desires to physically possess her but wildly struggled to remain uninvolved.

Thus the mutually contradictory tendencies for having and being are everpresent in human beings. The desire to have, to possess, owes its strength to the biological factor of the desire for survival: the desire to be, to share, to give, to sacrifice, owes its strength to the specific conditions of human existence and to the psychic need to overcome one’s isolation. In order not to feel utterly isolated which would condemn us to insanity, we need to find a new unity: with our fellow beings and with nature. The discussion is concluded with the observation that *The Foreigner* reveals to us Arun Joshi’s keen awareness of a deeper social reality of our times. He helps us peep into the anguished psyche of that affluent section of society that tries to buy its way to happiness. A reading of the novel suggests that this mode of living is littered with emotional landmines that derail even the most successful fast tracker. It can safely be argued that the pursuit of material possessions, individual identity and the creed of non involvement results in dissonance and despair for people with refined sensibilities. The self-complacent attitude of those who are wedded to the having mode of living does not continue for very long. For the soul, which is thus isolated from others, grows penitent of its pride and unsocial behaviour and, at last, steps down from its lofty positions to join the common life and share its sorrows and its joys. A search for authentic existence ends when one achieves the state of a happy co-existence and harmony with his fellow mortals. The very last verse of the rigveda is a beautiful expression of this supremely blessed state of human existence: Let your aims be one and the same; Let your hearts be joined together may your minds be in accord, and At peace with all, so may you be.

Conclusion

The most besetting problem that man faces today is the problem of meaninglessness. As Edmund Fuller remarks in our age: “*man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problem.. a conviction of isolation, randomness, [and] meaninglessness in his way of existence.*”⁷ The problem of meaninglessness is so pervasive that it threatens to corrode every sphere of human life. It has been treated in considerable detail in American and European literature. Its treatment by Indian novelists like Joshi is no less interesting.

As it is, the contemporary man finds himself participating in a “rat race” and is estranged not only from his fellowmen but also from his innermost nature, having nothing within or without him to fall back upon in moments of crisis. The present century has seen the dissolution of old certainties and dogmas and, as Paul Brunton observes: “*Never before were so many people plunged in so much uncertainty, so much perplexity and unsettlement.*”⁸ Deprived of the succor of ancient wisdom, which provided the much-needed basis for value and meaningfulness in life, the modern man has no substitute for faith and has aptly pointed out that “*ours is a world in which knowledge accumulates and wisdom decays.*”⁹

Certain recent Indian novelists in English have made significant efforts to delineate the predicament of the modern man. The work of Arun Joshi in particular reads like the spiritual odyssey of the twentieth century man who has lost his spiritual moorings. Despite some differences in their approach, all of Joshi’s heroes are “*men engaged in the meaning of life.*”¹⁰

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