

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

QUEST FOR THE SELF: READING ARUN JOSHI'S 'THE FOREIGNER'

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ABSTRACT

The novels of Arun Joshi, which are taken up for study in paper deal with a different set of problems *The Foreigner* presents to us a hero who has every reason to feel rootless born as he was to an English mother and an Indian father, brought up by an uncle in Nairobi and then moving to live in the UK and in the USA arriving in India to Bud his roots.

In the West, especially in Europe, inquiries into the nature of the self have for the last few centuries been characterized by ,the postulation of dichotomies, between a private self and a public self for example, or between the individual self on the one hand and society on the other. In this, by means of an examination of certain key authors/works and passages in European literature, discusses the shifts that took place in the moral life of the Western world, in the last few centuries first by the addition of a new element called " sincerity" and then by the replacement of that element by a "more exigent" concept which Trilling calls "authenticity". What strikes us most in this discussion is the presence, in Western civilization for the last few centuries, of a constant tension, in fact a schism, between self and society or between different selves. It is this schism which the Hindu view of life would appear to deny.

This paper attempts to study the quest for the self in the novels of Arun Joshi and the study undertakes and carries out a more comprehensive, more intense and more complex exploration of selfhood The first four novels of Arun Joshi- *The Foreigner* (1968) have been discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Arun Joshi is a novelist who, more strongly than most, has brought to his work that 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—on up to the city and the river, which takes place wholly in an imaginary land (<http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4485/Joshi-Arun.html>).

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 the 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.

The strange case of Billy Biswas is the story of a young, rich, American-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 words he puts into the mouth of his narrator; as he grows old he realizes that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood.

The apprentice, Joshi's third novel, takes his search for understanding man's predicament one step further toward the transcendental. Its central figure is a man essentially docile and uncourageous whose life more or less parallels the coming into being of postcolonial India. Eventually gaining a post in the civil service, he ends, as many real-life civil servants did, by taking a huge bribe. But in the final pages he comes to see that at least corrupt man can strive to do just a little good—he cleans shoes at a temple—and that while there are in the world young people still untainted, there is a spark of hope.

In *The Last Labyrinth*, the hero, if that always is not too strong a term for the man Joshi puts at the center, 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 nonunderstanding. But the way there is gripping. Joshi writes with a persuasive ease and illuminates the outward scene with telling phrase after telling phrase.

Then there is the city and the river, where 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 everywhere. 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

Background- *The Foreigner* (1968)

The Foreigner (1968) is Joshi's first major novel. The novel, which has received praise for its employment of a sophisticated novelistic technique, also very skillfully unfolds the theme of a search, the quest for the Self. The novel begins mid-way in the course of events and Joshi uses the voice of Sindi Oberoi to unfold the plot and theme of his novel. Called to the mortuary in the U. S. A. to identify Babu's corpse, Sindi Oberoi cannot but admit being Babu's friend and "perhaps a bit more" (Arun Joshi: *The Foreigner*, p6). There is a reference made to June Blyth and we see the devastating effect Babu Khernkha's death has on her. However Joshi suspends this aspect of the narrative to follow Oberoi to New Delhi and to his meeting with Babu Khernkha's rich father. Mr. Khernkha eventually employs Sindi. Prodded by Sheila, Babu's elegant sister Sindi Oberoi begins to relive the past. He is annoyed by this for reminiscing about Babu meant talking about himself something he intensely disliked "Helplessly I watched my past overtake me. I had travelled half the world to escape Babu's ghost and still it stalked me & om behind those bronze statues. As Babu's friend, I had to talk " (p 17).

The Depth of The Friendship

The past intermingles with the present in Sindi's life as he tells Sheila about the depth of the friendship he had shared with Babu. Part I of the novel thus explores the growth and development of Sindi's relationship with Babu and June Blyth. He has occasion to meet them on account of his duties in the foreign students' office. Disarmingly frank in his encounters with both, Sindi buds both Babu and June appealing in different ways. While Babu with his striking good looks and naivety arouses all his protective instincts, it is June who destroys all his defences and his philosophy of non-involvement

and detachment cultivated on account of his earlier experiences

Part I of the novel serves as an introduction to the circle in which Sinai had moved while in the U. S. A. However his capacity to feel alone is overwhelming and it is his loneliness- which surfaces in Part I, is strengthened in Part II and in a way resolved in Part III- that reaches out to us in all its poignancy. For instance, at the party hosted annually for the foreign students, Sindi Oberoi observes, "It is remarkable how you can be in a crowded room like that and still feel lonely, like you were sitting in your own tomb"(p.23).

Part I of the novel also establishes Sindi's preoccupation with death as also his antecedents Dom to an English mother and an Indian father and brought up by an Uncle in Nairobi after the death of his parents, he is presented as distinctly rootless and a stranger in the UK and in the US A., as also in India. Any question pertaining to this aspect of his upbringing quickens his anger, and yet he is incapable of ignoring it.

'Where are you from '?

"Everybody always asked the same silly question ' where are you from ' as if it really mattered a great deal where I was from" (p.23, 24). But it did matter and towards the close of the novel Sindi Oberoi realises why roots and a sense of belonging is important One important reason for the resilient feature in narration is that Sinai's astute observations on the other characters permit the reader to judge him as well as the others who see him in a different light.

Part II of the novel is much larger than Part I and comprises the growing and deepening of Sindi's relationship with June. For Sindi even June's physical beauty reminds him of the loneliness of his life. He does not mask the feelings aroused in him, "I couldn't resurrect her in detail but saw the mass of golden hair, the blue eyes and the pink lips. And I had to admit to myself that I was a lonely man" (p. 26). However, every step that he takes in the relationship reminds him of his resolution of remaining uninvolved and the promise to maintain a certain distance with all people. When he visits June's home for the first time he is afraid of losing his uninvolved stance and tortures himself with

questions that storm his mind repeatedly. "Once we had settled down in the comfortable high-backed chairs my fear returned Was I getting involved? Could this be the beginning of uncontrollable events? Perhaps not. I had sat in many living rooms before But this time there was a difference" (p 65).

Sindi proves to be justified in his apprehensions for June grows to become too essential for him Joshi establishes the nobility and goodness of June who gives of her love and self freely. She is not held up as an example of American promiscuity but presented as a genuine and good human being Physical intimacy soon develops between Sindi and June and it is Sindi with the tired voice of experience who comments "How long could I stay free! The pain of earlier years had taught me wisdom but I didn't know if I could depend upon it" (p.70). This repeated reference to Sindi's past concerns his stay in England of his involvement with two older women, Kathy and Anna.

Recounting his past to June, Sindi does not romanticize nor does he spare himself of any blame. He shows June how callously he had conducted himself with an older Kathy and later how Anna for whom he had left Kathy, deserted him for honoring her marriage vows. As a result of suffering the pangs of disappointed love, Sindi realizes after prolonged conversations with a priest that "Love begot greed and attachment and it led to possession" (p. 170).

Joshi fails to convince the reader of the manner in which Sindi arrives at this realisation. Joshi encapsulates these heavy realizations within a few paragraphs and is hopeful of convincing his readers about Sindi's passage through two love affairs to the final dawning of light. In actual fact the description of the manner in which realisation dawns on Sindi, appears to be a parody of Siddhartha's (Buddha's) quest Note for instance the use of the words and the repeated references to the aid of a priest and books on God and on mysticism There is a hint of pomposity when Sindi says, "That summer I worked in a library in a small village in Scotland and I had plenty of time to think and to read I also made friends with a Catholic priest who lived there. Initially he had wanted to convert me they try to convert every Indian- but when he found that the questions bothering me were much bigger

than that, He sincerely began to help me in my exploration"(p 169). And later when Sindi's mock awakening bursts upon him, the reader cannot but mock Joshi's attempts at elevating Sindi's mind and position to that of a mystic and a Saint. "Suddenly I felt a great lightning, as if someone had lifted a burden on my chest and it all came through in a flash. All Love whether of things or persons, or oneself- was illusion and all pain sprang from this illusion" (p 170) With the exception of this attempt of endowing Sindi with the qualities of a saint, the portrayal of Sindi as an Outsider is otherwise very much like that of Albert Camus' protagonist in the novel *The Outsider* (1961).

In Camus' novel *Meursault*, just like Sindi, have no particular intentions of securing promotions or in cementing a relationship with marriage. When questioned by Mr. Khemkha about life and how much time he devoted to social duties, Sindi says, "I told him politely that I wasn't interested in moving up. A proper social life therefore was not quite necessary for me" (p 45). And we Bud Meursault doing the same when given a chance to further his prospects with an assignment in Paris " I told him I was quite prepared to go, but really didn't care much one way or the other." When reprimanded for his lack of ambition Meursault says, "As a student I had plenty of ambition of the kind he meant. But, when I had to drop my studies, I very soon realized all that was pretty futile" (Camus: p 48).

Another instance is the manner in which both react when confronted with the emotion of love. While Sindi tortures himself by avoiding the commitment of marriage and the ensuing possession Meursault goes one step further and displays a benign indifference to the state of marriage and the person he is to marry. To him the question is not of belief but of accommodating the desires of others with the least interference in his own life.

Marie came that evening and asked me if I'd marry her. I said I didn't mind; if she was keen on it, we'd get married. Then she asked me again if I loved her. I replied, much as before, that her question meant nothing or next to nothing- but I supposed { didn't 'If that's how you feel," she said, "why marry me?" I explained that it had no importance really but, if it would give her pleasure,

we could get married right away. I pointed out that the suggestion came from her; as for me, I'd merely said yes. (Camus: p. 48)

Sindi's arguments against marriage and love seem unnatural for he does not disguise the pain he experiences when June leaves him for Babu. While Meursault convinces his readers, Sindi does not because Joshi's satire is not directed against the Americans and the Indians, the U. S. A. and India but also against Sindi. Joshi's purpose is to convey the true spirit of detachment, not the Non-attachment which the European Meursault practices with conviction. Joshi's attempt here is to fit an ideal of detachment with all its ramifications.

True detachment

True detachment is when one is involved with people and work and involved with the results not the gratitude of the people. The idea of comparison between Meursault and Sindi is important. While Sindi shows detachment, Meursault practices non-attachment. Detachment helps Sindi acquire evenness of mind. The stress is on renunciation in action and not renunciation of action. Mundane duties of life should not be abhorred, but selfishness must be surpassed. It is not renunciation of action itself, but renunciation of the longing for the fruit that brings mental balance in man. As long as a man remains conscious of his social obligations or sees wrong being done to others, he cannot remain inactive. "One must not shun duty because it is disagreeable, nor become attached to it because it is agreeable. But if an active person cheerfully performs a duty because it is to be done, and renounces all attachment to its result, he obtains the fruit of renunciation, namely, inner peace" (R.P. Rama: p 167).

June turns to Babu when Sindi, despite his love for her, spurns the idea of marriage. Babu, on the other hand is the antithesis of Sindi and that is why he kills himself. Babu is portrayed as innocent as against Sindi who exudes the experience of an ancient mariner, despite being twenty-five years of age. Sindi strikes one as an ancient mariner because he is consumed with a world-weary-philosophy and a hidden guilt that his actions are not completely blameless. Babu's enthusiasm and zest for life is stressed and Sindi's bitter world-weariness provides

the contrast Many reasons are given to explain Babu's acute sense of insecurity when compared and contrasted with Sindi's self-confidence and independence Babu is the Indian boy, the only son of a rich doting father. He has been sheltered and has grown up without the necessary equipment for independent study and independence in decision making Babu is depicted as being hopelessly incapable of adapting himself to the methods of study in the Universities of the U.S A. As a contrast we have Sindi's effortless manner of excelling in the academia He is presented as a scholar who does not make much of his scholastic capabilities It is Babu who recognizes this scholarship, recognition of which deepens his insecurity, depression and feelings of inferiority. Joshi traces Babu's problems to an ambitious and overbearing father. Lacking in confidence to live up to his father's expectations, Babu says, much to Sindi's annoyance, " If they throw me out of school this time, my father might never want to see me again." (p.150).

Applicable To Every Indian In The U.S.A

Joshi's depiction of Babu's condition is applicable to every Indian in the U.S.A. There is a hint of a lack of seriousness when the author speaks of Babu's obsessive interest in girls and the desire to play around, " What is the good of coming to America if one is not to play around with girls" and later as if to put Sindi's doubts at rest he confirms his plans by saying "Of course, I don't want to marry anyone. I just want to gain experience you know" (p.22). However, he does want to get gain a sense of security and love which constantly eludes him. For this reason alone he does contemplate marriage and becomes engaged to June. Despite this, Babu fails to adjust to the American scene and the method of study. His bewilderment is further increased when he learns from June that she had been Sindi's lover. All his Indian morality surfaces at this revelation and coupled with an acute sense of betrayal compounded with his academic failures he drives himself to death. This aspect of moral values is discussed when Sheila denounces June as an immoral and scheming woman who goes about "laying snares for young boys" (p. 55).

Sheila does not know that Sindi was June's lover. But this fact does not stop Sindi from facing

the truth of his own culpability. When Sindi informs June about Babu's tragic accident he thinks "she didn't realise we had killed a man. I hated myself, but for her I felt only pity"(P.7). Later Sindi acknowledges that he had wanted Babu to die. "I might not have willed it consciously, but in some foggy chamber of my being I must have waited it to happen"(p.8). Sindi tries to vindicate America and the Americans by saying, "You are not fair to what she was, Sheila- I am sure you would have liked her. And then don't forget that codes of morality differ from country to country. Gris do certain things in America that women would never do here. That doesn't mean they are wicked" (p 55).

Portrayal of India and Indians

Joshi is guarded in his portrayal of India and Indians, America and Americans India is denigrated for the steady growth in the gaping differences between the rich like Mr. Khemka and the poorly paid workers like Muthu, and the growing spectre of corruption and nepotism, a fact that is cruelly brought home to Sindi when Mr. Khemka becomes bankrupt Faced with the knowledge that Mr. Khemka maintained duplicate account books to cheat the government, Sindi is appalled at this devious method of evading income- tax. A clear picture of India's business world is depicted when Mr. Khemka angrily reprimands Sindi for not having bribed the officials. "Oh, you could have bribed them or asked them to come again or some such thing Surely something could have been done to hold them off for a day or two" (p 12). Sindi is puzzled as to why and how a postponement of the income-tax raid would have helped matters Mr. Khemka puts him at ease by pompously explaining, "It would have made all the difference in the world!

I could have had the accounts straightened out before they were seized and I could have contacted just the right man in the government"(p.212) The portrayal of Mr. Khemka's world is subtly infused into the fabric of the novel. Sindi finds occasion to remark when offered a drink by Sheila from "the mobile trolley where a dozen bottles of imported liquor stood in a resplendent display. At the hotel they said foreign liquors could be had only in the black-market" (pi.13). This remark is used to portray the opulence of Khemka's

household as also the manner in which money is made and wasted. Babu's remark that "the only poor people he knew were his servants" (p. 10) creates an impression of the cocoon-like insulated world of the rich who are unaware of the misery that lies beyond their doors.

The problem of the self thus assumes varied dimensions. Joshi uses the outsider's point of view to probe the problem of the self and uses satire to implement the varying shades of the self and the many stages in its journey towards a realisation of its true worth. For instance when Sindi attends Khemka's party held to promote his business interests, Sindi in his characteristic way comments, "I had read much of inequality in India; now I could see it masquerade as company law and the amendments of Parliament" (p.16). Mrs. Blyth's self-righteous comment "Look what good diet has achieved in America" can at best be unctuous rather than objective. To this Sindi retorts that Americans with their extra height and years have been successful in carrying heavier guns for a lonelier existence Joshi seems to decry Americans for their materialism. The satire becomes direct and pungent when Sindi faces Indian conditions of living and of work. Sindi is at first unable to fit into either world. R.P. Rama says, "his object judgement is against the rich who swindle both the government and the people" (R.P.Rama: p 167).

Sketchy Characterization

The satirical point of view results in sketchy characterizations with the possible exception of June and Sheila. The focus is on just a few characters for Sindi takes centre stage. June's portrayal is vivid and sympathetic- an obvious attempt to rid all Indians of the impression that American women are of easy virtue. June is described as kind and beautiful. In a letter to Sheila, Babu writes, "Don't imagine that June is the ordinary sort of American girl that other Indians marry. She has got intellect and beauty that I can't hope to find elsewhere" (p.53).

In her involvement with Sindi June is able to win our sympathy, for she is faced with a reluctant lover. But in her involvement with Babu she sets in motion events that would finally lead to her own death. Sindi does not regard June's death as

something shameful even though it had resulted from an unsuccessful abortion. On the other hand Sindi rages against India and Indians for having debauched June. "Behind Babu lay the stupidity of his father and his sister and his entire civilisation. I hated everything that was India, as if the whole nation had conspired to debauch June" (p. 182)

Sheila on the other hand represents Indian womanhood in all its urbane, sophisticated enchanting grace. Much of her physical charm is deliberately left unsaid for like the sari she wears Joshi wishes Sheila to be mysteriously beautiful. Babu eulogizes her variously as intelligent, clever and progressive. We are not dissatisfied when we "meet" her and Sindi admiringly remarks, "She belonged to many worlds at the same time and I admired her for that" (p.146). Despite this, Sindi cannot resist this pontifical pompous remark "She was getting my shoes from under the divan and as I watched her arch back I was filled with a sense of sympathy for all Indian women who always had their back arched, stooping to someone's service" (p.218).

Among the three women we see in the novel it is Sheila who is endowed with an indefinable air of mystery. While June is transparent, Mrs. Blyth, her mother is too inane to be regarded as anything more than an average American housewife. Perhaps Joshi's intentions were to portray Sheila as an ideal woman, not typically Indian but sufficiently Indian to misunderstand June. Resilient, she is quick to give affection when required. Even Sindi is not left out. When Mr. Khemka finds occasion to criticize Sindi for living, "but as bad as dead" (p 137) Sheila is quick in defending Sindi "Don't say that Sindi is not dead" (p 137). Her rushing to his rescue arouses a feeling of tenderness in Sindi and it is on this note of gentle affection that we close the novel.

Beginning with his relations with June, we see that Sindi's philosophy of detachment gets steadily eroded. He decides against marriage with June because he does not want to ruin their friendship and yet when June turns to Babu his feelings are not that of an uninterested non-attached man. "After June left me it was lucky I had my work to go back to; otherwise the emptiness that surrounded me would have been

unbearable"(p.141). This attempt to project himself as superhuman comes to naught when the reader realises that Sindi does everything possible to be physically near June.

But it is a short-lived victory for Sindi once again becomes enmeshed in June's life. This time his non-attachment sends Babu to his death. His attempt to confront June boomerangs on him. Babu is upset with the knowledge of the intimacies shared by Sindi and June and recklessly drives off to his death. Once again it is Sindi who grows guilty and as days roll by his guilt becomes too heavy to bear. The climax to these events is when he learns of June expecting Babu's baby and he realises "Wasn't Babu's child my own, in a way? Hadn't I driven her into his arms?" (p 187). This event further erodes his complacent philosophy of non-attachment June's death after an attempted abortion increases Sindi's guilt and despair. His grief is expressed in the distracted manner in which he moves about in June's room after her death.

His philosophy of non-attachment comes full circle when he goes to the riverside and contemplates all that has happened to himself and to the people he had grown to love. "I went to the river and watched the dawn break over the dark waters. Inch by inch the sun climbed out of the womb of the Universe It reminded me of the morning I had sat on the rock overlooking the valley and experienced my first insight into the mystery of existence"(p.192). The words "dawn", "womb" and "river" indicate the extent to which Joshi wishes his readers to realize the birth of a new Sindi. At this high point of the novel we see a Sindi who begins a journey of self-discovery. His realization of the true meaning of detachment is thus brought out. Thus he learns that detachment is not inaction but right action it was not sufficient to be non-attached and glory in it but to be detached and do the right thing by all people. Joshi thus prepares the way for the finale when Sindi is able to act and thereby resolve his struggle of the self. It is however of no mean significance that Sindi is able to resolve his problems in India amongst the people he belonged to in spirit. His detachment had driven June to Babu and when once again his detachment threatened to destroy the Khemka Company Sindi is able to act in time and act in the

right way. It is important to note here that Sindi misunderstands the philosophy of detachment It is when he pursues nonattachment that tragedies ensue, because all created beings are interdependent and sustain one another by their actions, which in Wm contributes to the world order.

An income tax raid fenders the progress of the Khemka bus mess almost crippled Characteristically, in his bid to remain as uninvolved as it was possible, Sindi decides to look for new jobs. With his qualifications it does not prove to be a difficult task and in his desire to go away to fresher pastures in Bombay, Sindi excitedly begins all preparations to leave However leaving America seemed easier than leaving the Khemka Company for he learns that his leaving would mean that workers like Muthu would go jobless and subsequently hungry.

Conclusion

Joshi on the other band reveals a deliberate conscious effort to topple the over confidence of a materialistic West. He does not construct an image of an Indian identity to compare with the West but endorses the Indian image of simple living and high thinking Joshi appears to have made an attempt to resolve the crisis of identity. Ashis Nandy in his work *The Intimate Enemy* speaks of the unheroic man of India's non-modern society who refuses to see himself as a player or as a counter player to the temptation of the West Every culture or society has a core fund of survival wisdom, which will prevent it mortgaging its soul to its oppressors. According to Nandy India is not non-west. It is a living culture which has to live and it has an obligation to itself. This Joshi sets out to show in his work.

My argument has been that the urbanity that exists in the works of Joshi speaks of the modern temperament, which Joshi accepts, does not fight but tries to resolve by looking forward He emphasizes the need to discover one's roots and belong, to do one's duty and feel the onus of responsibility and thereby salvage the selfhood that one hankers after. My argument has been aimed also at the disparities in treatment of the problems of identity in the works of Joshi. Despite the struggle by the individual self towards an acceptance of the

world around, there is still a schism and ultimately it is the self's liberation which is presented as the supreme value. In Joshi on the other hand there is a gradual attempt towards a synthesis of the inner and outer worlds.

This Joshi offers by his subtle use of the doctrine of Karma. He refers to responsibility for one's actions, involvement in deeds, thereby advocating the Bhagavad Gita which is philosophy in action and not mere discourse, philosophy in living and not pedagogy alone.

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