



ARUN JOSHI'S NOVELS: SHADOWS OF HIS TIMES

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ABSTRACT

Arun Joshi (1939–1993) was an Indian writer. He is known for his novels *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and *The Apprentice*. He won the Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel *The Last Labyrinth* in 1982. His life covers the two important ages after independence – the age of Jawaharlal Nehru and the age of Indira Gandhi, marked by rapid changes in economic, social, cultural, educational and political set up of the country. The period from 1950 to 1984 was dominated largely by Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. Arun Joshi began his literary career in the fifties, just after the independence of India. Being the product of the age, he has successfully incorporated all the, political, social, cultural, educational and economic events taking place in the country from 1950 to 1990 in his novels. The socio – political milieu of the age of Arun Joshi has been instrumental in bringing out his novels. He used all the important historical, political, economic and cultural events of this period as raw materials for his novels. The happenings and tendencies of the regimes have been artistically reflected in his novels. Thus, his novels are the shadows of his times. Though they belong to a certain segment of history, yet they have been presented in such a way that they have become universal and timeless.

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The age in which Arun Joshi lived and worked for the expression of artistic genius was marked by rapid changes in economic, social, cultural, educational and political set up of the country. Arun Joshi began his literary career in the fifties, just after the independence of India. His life covers the two important ages after independence – the age of Jawaharlal Nehru and the age of Indira Gandhi. The period from 1950 to 1984 was dominated largely by Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi since Arun Joshi was the product of his age, he has successfully incorporated all the, political, social, cultural, educational and economic events taking place in the

country from 1950 to 1990. All his novels from '*The Foreigner*' to '*The City and the River*' represent a period of nearly forty years. All the important historical, political, economic and cultural events of this period have been taken up by the author and used as raw materials for his novels.

The period from 1950 to 1964 was Nehruvian era known for its scientism, democratic socialism, industrialism and mechanization. After independence, Nehru was conscious of India's role in the world countries under one banner and became the leader of the Non-Aligned Countries during the cold war between the two books of the world. He was the man

who propounded the principal of Panchsheel for maintaining world peace and emphasized the need of having good relations with neighbouring like China, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Nehru drew his inspiration from Marxism and Democratic Socialism, and stood for anti-imperialism, anti – apartheid, nationalism and socialism. Though leftist in his sentiments were tried by a silken thread to the right under the influence of Gandhiji. As far as the general spectrum of ideologies for the regeneration of Indian society which was badly dislocated after the partition. At one end were the Gandhian who believed in a decentralization, relatively self – sufficient ‘village communities without an artificial proliferation of wants minimal resource to modern technology. The Socialists both within and outside the Congress argued that the removal of inequalities was an important as growth and stood for the land reforms, greater public ownership and strict regulation of the private sectors a means of achieving greater equality.

After independence, the Congress Party under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru attempted a compromise between above mentioned viewpoints – a compromise which leaned towards socialism in declared intent but afforded the conservation ample opportunities to resist implementation of Socialist policies.

The partition of India adversely affected the economy of India, particularly in the matter of food grains and agricultural products. 68% of irrigated areas of wheat and rice as of undivided India went to Pakistan. The divided India experienced an unprecedented situation prevailed in regard to live stock since the better milk yielding cattle was in Sind and West Punjab. The cotton textile industry in India also forced a very unhappy situation as most of the textile mills were situated in India and the raw material was produced in Pakistan.

As far as the general industry was concerned, India’s resources largely unimpaired. Almost all the resources like coal, iron ore, manganese and mica and all the heavy chemical plants, all paper mills, glass factories, cement, paint and matches factories were

located in India. The shortage of food stuff was big problem before the government of free India, the extensive imports of food stuff created a serious problem of balance of payments in the trade.

The problems which India faced after independence were not absolutely new. They had grown during the British rule. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in 1946:

Nearly all our problems today have grown during British rule and as a direct result of British policy, the prices, the minority problems, various vested interests, foreign, and Indian, the lack of industry and the neglect of agriculture, the extreme backwardness in the social services and above all, the tragic poverty of the people¹

For the rapid economic regeneration of India and up gradation of national defense, and the elimination of poverty and unemployment, the need for rapid industrialization with a special emphasis on the development of basic and heavy industries was felt without ignoring agriculture which was the main stay of the people.

After independence, India faced three major problems – rehabilitation of refugees, service food shortage and inflationary pressure on economy. The First Five Year Plan (1951–56) accorded the highest priority to agriculture including irrigation and power projects. During this period, the Bhakra–Nagal Dam Project of Damodar Valley and Hirakund Valley were started. A special emphasis was laid on the development of basic industries, not ignoring the small scale industries and the cottage industries.

During the Nehruvian era, the Indo–Pak and Indo–China relations became hostile. During this period, Kashmir became an apple of discord between India and Pakistan. In 1950 China gave a jolt to India by forcible occupying Tibet.

Both India and China had suffered from Imperial rule. Hence Jawaharlal Nehru believed that both the countries with common experience of exploitation at the hands of Colonial powers and common problems of under–development and poverty would join hands to earn a respectable place

in the world. Both the countries subscribes to the policy of Non-Alignment and Non-aggression. When Nehru visited China in 1954, he not only recognized China's sovereignty over Tibet but also signed the Panch Sheel, i.e. five principles of co-existence. But Nehru's ambition of Asian leadership and world reputation collapsed when in October, 1962 China launched an attack and over ran many Indian posts in NEFA.

All the major economic, political, military and social events taking place during Nehruvian era have been reflected in the first four novels of Arun Joshi in one way or the other. '**The Foreigner**' was written by Arun Joshi against the economic background prevailing in India in the fifties during the first and second Five-Years Plans. It was during this period that Nehru laid special emphasis on the development of basic industries and setting up of institutions of engineering and technology in public sector all over India. The Government of Indian encouraged students to go to abroad for the study of engineering and technology.

In *The Foreigner*, Khemka and his son, Balbir projected the very image of the fifties of India. Mr. Khemka who was the Managing Director of his company manufactured air-conditioner in New Delhi and had collaboration with an American company. He had been to New York. After coming back from there, he decided to send his son, Balbir to America to make a man of him. His training in engineering and technology would have been of great help to him but his son died in a car accident in America leaving a wide vacuum for his father and his sister, Shiela who were responsible for running their factory. When Sindi Oberai came to Delhi, he was offered a job as an assistant manager in Khemka's company. But an income tax petty official who was a trade unionist and leftist was very much against Khemka because they thought that Mr. khemka was a tax-invader and an enemy of the proletariat. Following is a very interesting dialogue between Sindi Oberai and his income-tax man:

Don't pretend that the rich people are the only honest people in the world," the income-

tax man said darkly, "I know a thing or two about them. If I were the minister, this whole office would be wound up and handed over to the proletariat².

The tax-man further said: "

India is working toward a new age, Mr. Oberai..... An age in which each man will be equal to mother.... It is only people like you and Mr. Khemka who are holding revolutions.³

The income-tax man called Mr. Oberai a "bourgeois" and the enemy of the "proletariat." The leftists and the trade unionists divided the society of those days in two parts – the bourgeois and the proletariat under the impact of Marxist ideology. The struggle between the capital and labour began. The capitalists were charged of exploiting the labour. The income-tax man labeled charges against Mr. Khemka saying:

It is you have swindled those miserable wretches in rage who push carts on your streets and die at twenty five. It is you who have been telling lies and fabricating documents just so that you could on-condition this ostentation house and throw gigantic parties for the horde of jackals who masquerade as your friends.⁴

Some troubles are developed in Mr. Khemka's company. There was no sale for months. The money transaction was almost choked off. The creditors began to queue up for their payments. Khemka's employee's got worried when they heard that Mr. Khemka was put under arrest and there was no chance for his acquittal and his company would be taken up by some banker sooner or later.

Billy Biswas in Joshi's second novel '*The Strange case of Billy Biswas*' was also sent to the United States to study engineering but he soon have gave up engineering in favour of his choice of Anthropology and was already halfway through Ph.D. The novel is set against the background of cultural and educational exchanges taking place in India and the U.S.A. Billy Biswas belonged to a high sophisticated family. The author writes about his ancestry:

Billy's family had originally come from Bengal. His grandfather had one time been the Prime Minister of a famous princely state in Orissa. His father after completing his law studies at Inner Temple, had mostly practiced law at Allahabad and Delhi. At the Time when we were in America, he was a judge of India's Supreme Court⁵.

Based on the local colour of Bundelkhand region, the novel is a story of horror, suspense, mystery and romance. It highlights a clash between the West and the East with regard to their civilization and cultures. Billy is seen first in New York attending a mid-Western University for a summer course at Colombia. Though he comes of a very high family, he is crazy by temperament. In America, he lives in slums with Indian and Negros. Though he was educated in England speaks English with a British accent, he has deep roots in the wild culture and association with the Negros in America. The author writes about Billy's Interest in the primitive mass:

What impressed me even more was his passionate involvement with his subject. It was gradually dawned upon me that it was around his interest in the primitive man that his entire life had been organized⁶.

When Billy was asked why he was drawn to Anthropology, he replied that he was wanted to read the books of Anthropology and visit the places described on them. He said:

All I want to do in life is to visit the place they describe, meet the people who live – there, find out about the aboriginals of the world.⁷

Billy had a vague feeling which made him uncomfortable. Tulla once said:

Billy feels something inside him, but he is not yet sure. Sometimes he is afraid of it and tries to suppress it.⁸

It was a great force—a primitive force. He was afraid of it and tried to suppress it. But it was stronger in him than in any other person. It could explode any time. It was on account of the dominance of this force in him that he was not cut off from his roots in spite of his

long stay in America. The narrator tells us about his alienation from his own culture:

In spite of a somewhat longish stay in America, neither of us had lost our roots in India, or in the city of Delhi, nor did we suffer much, except for passing spells of loneliness, from that to be burdened with.⁹

Billy come in contact with Meena Chatterjee who belonged to a Bengali family and got married to her but neither his parents nor his wife could please him. He could not find peace in the surroundings in which he lived. The letters he had written to Tulla revealed the abnormal state of his mind arising out of the cultural clashes in his mind. He found peace in the woods of Maikala Hills and among the tribal's there. He lived there as a primitive pilgrim and renamed a stranger to the civilized world.

Thus, in spite of the beginning of industrialization and mechanization in India during the Nehruvian period, India and her culture still retained their virginity and primitiveness. Dr. Mohan rightly remarks about Billy's journey from Boston to the Satpura Hills:

From Boston to Delhi has been journey from alienation to arrival, from selfishness to sacrifice, from an anomic responsible to himself to a member of mankind, from being to becoming.¹⁰

'*The Apprentice*' which is the third novel of Arun Joshi is focused on the shameful defeat of India in the Indo-China War of 1962 and disillusionment with freedom and corruption in high offices rampant in the age of Jawaharlal Nehru. In spite of the treaty of non-aggression, peaceful existence and Panch Sheel, China invaded India in NEFA in 1962 and occupied the frontier posts causing humiliation and shame to India. Ratan Rathore who is the protagonist of the novel tells the boy that during the Chinese aggression, people talk of Chinese betrayal and the honour lose by India after her defeat in the war:

I imagine they spoke of Chinese perfidy, and of honour. The government, I understand, is determined to defend our honour.... What I learnt was that it was difficult to retrieve honour, once it is lost.¹¹

India lost the war with China in 1962 on account of corruption in the government departments. Ratan Rathore after taking bribes from Sheikh alias Himmat Singh cleared the purchase of defective weapons for the army stores. He tells the boy:

The Sheikh had a big pile of military materials lying in Bombay which I had rejected because they were no good. He wanted the Minister and the Secretary to look into the case. They sent him to me. I refused to pass them. The Sheikh, then, offered me cut, a bribe. This bribe, for some obscure reasons, I accepted¹²

Ratan Rathore, the Protagonist of the novel has learned from his experience that his father's sacrifice and martyrdom for the sake of his country's freedom were of no practical value for him and his mother. What his father had left for him after his martyrdom was starvation, a sick widow and patriotic favour with no funds. What the mother of Ratan Rathore had learned was not patriotism but the importance of money:

It was not patriotism but money, she said, that brought respect and brought security. Money made friends. Money succeeds where all else failed. There were money laws, she said, but money was the law into itself¹³

Ratan Rathore recalls how his father was forgotten after a tear from his death and how he was humiliated, rejected and jeered at in hunting jobs. He felt, that even after independence, people were not free, what the people of India had inherited from Englishmen which were a new kind of slavery:

We thought we were free. What we had in fact, was a new slavery. Yes a new slavery with new masters, politicians, officials, the rich, the old and the new. Swindlers in fancy cars.¹⁴

Ratan Rathore presents a picture of Delhi after independence in the Nehruvian era:

They are all the same, these governments' colonies. Acres of mortar, an occasional park. Box upon box of identical flats, yellow by day, colourless at night. Trees that die as

samplings, a dispensary short of medicines, library without books.....¹⁵

In the post-independence period, the high-ups got more interested in deals than in the reconstruction of their country. Money became their prime motto, not the service of the people. Ratan Rathore tells the boy:

Deals, deals, deals, my friend, that is what the world runs on..... It is not the atom or the sun or God or sex that lies at the heart of the universe, it Deals, Deal.¹⁶

Thus the social, political and military events taking place in the post – independence India during the Nehruvian era form the core of the novel.

'*The Labyrinth*', the fourth novel of Arun Joshi is once again set in the period when India was on the way of industrialization and mechanization. The protagonist of the novel Som Bhasker is no different from Sindi Oberai, Babu Rao Khemka and Billy Biswas. Like Sindi and Billy, he got education in the foreign universities and learnt the way of modern life. His father himself was a great scientist and industrialist. After the death of his father, he became a millionaire overnight at the age twenty – five. After returning from Harvard, he became the Managing Director in his plastic factory. He was none to reckon with in the industrial world of Bombay. His primary work was to grab and annex failing industries to his industrial empire. But in spite of having wealth, good education and family life, he felt some want in his life. His urge to have a new experience in every walk of life misled him and deviated him from the right back. His sudden encounters with Anuradha bewildered him and he felt a victim to her magical charm. Aftab Rai, who was Som's double, was a plastic manufacturer but not good at handling business. Under the bewitching fascination of Anuradha, Som started neglecting his family and business and was drawn by suicidal impulse. Som's wavering mind adversely affected his business.

'*The City and the River*', which was the fifth and last novel of Arun Joshi is a political fable. This is a novel that is truly a parable of the times. It startlingly presents a real vision of every day politics. The novel unfolds the story of the Grand Masters who rules the

city by the river and is determined to become an unchallenged King. Things move smoothly till a strange prophecy is made by the palace Astrologer. They learned man predicts the crowning of a new king in place of Grand Master. The appeal of the novel lies in the skilful handling of the course plotted by intrigues and corruption in high places.

'*The City and the River*' is of a great historical and political interest because it is set against the background of Internal Emergency imposed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1975 to save her throne from the wrath of people. The doctrial and autocratic policies of Mrs. Indira Gandhi led to the people's rebellion against her rule. Rallies and demonstrations organized by Jai Prakash Narayan forced Mrs. Indira Gandhi to declare a state of Internal Emergency in the country. Consequently the fundamental rights of citizens were suspended, the press was gagged, the freedom of thought and speech was withdrawn, the leaders of the political parties were thrown behind the bars, the family planning was imposed on the people against their wish, and atmosphere of terror and fear was generated in the country. Mrs. Indira Gandhi led by her son, Sanjay Gandhi and Yogi, Dhirendra Brahmchari. In General Elections of 1977, Mrs. Indira Gandhi was thrown out of power by the people of India and democracy was restored in the country. Indira Bhatta and Suja Alexander write about the political nature of the theme of the novel:

The novel indirectly pictures the events of the emergency regime in India and the malpractices restored to by the political powers of the time. In the novel, the Grand Masters and his subordinated employ malpractices in order to reach the apex of political powers.¹⁷

Indira Bhatta and Suja Alexander further writes:

Arun Joshi satirises the way in which the political leaders struggle and make use of wrong means in order to guard the seat of power and position through the novel. He pictures the malpractices employed by Grand Master for the safe keeping of his power by

taking the aid of guns, lacer weapons, police and army.¹⁸

Thus, '*The City and the River*' offers a powerful comment and satire on the social and political scenario of the seventies during the rule of Mrs. Indira Gandhi with a prophecy that oppression would continue and the oppressed would continue to struggle against it.

A close study of all the five novels of Arun Joshi unfolds the facts that these novels cover a span of about forty years from 1950 to 1990. It was a period when Congress Party was led by Jawaharlal Nehru and her daughter Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Both Pandit Nehru and Mrs. Indira Gandhi ruled the country for about thirty seven years with exception of about two years when Janta Party came in power after 1977. The notable features of the regime of Jawaharlal Nehru were inefficient and corruption in high offices the Indo-Chins War and rapid industrialization of the country with an emphasis on the development of basic and heavy industries. The regime of Mrs. Indira Gandhi was marked by the imposition of internal emergency and political totalitarianism. The happenings and tendencies of those regimes have been artistically reflected in the novels of Arun Joshi. The socio – political milieu of the age of Arun Joshi has been instrumental in bringing out his novels. Thus, Arun Joshi was the product of the age in which he lived and worked. In fact, his novels are the shadows of his times chequered with various hires. Though they belong to a certain segment of history, yet they have been presented in such a way that they have become universal and timeless.

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