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'Is Alienation Self-imposed?' in Arun Joshi's Novel *The Foreigner*

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ABSTRACT

Arun Joshi is one of the Indo-English writers who gave new directions to Indian English novels. His fictional world is characterized by the alienation of the individual shown through a crisis of identity in an emotionally disturbed life. Alienation is a recurrent theme in different aspects. His heroes are self-centered persons and prone to self-pity and escapism. In spite their psychological weaknesses they are genuine to strive to understand the better meaning of life and the mental peace. Joshi deals with the themes of inner conflict, identity crisis, alienation and East-West encounter, existential problems.

*The Foreigner* (1968) is a story of the protagonist SindiOberoi, a modern young man searching for meaning to his life groping through the dark alleys of reality. In his search, he confronted with self and the question of his existence. His dilemma is based on his socio-psychological make-up of mind. He is too much obsessed with his hypocrisy and stupidity. Due to the deprivation of parental love and care, he also becomes indifferent to the reminiscence for his parents' images. He has been nourishing his own ideas of life and pretending detachment. Finally, he finds himself lonely, frustrated, dejected, rootless, restless, isolated and alienated due to his detachment and non-involvement in social and family life. He is a ruined soul wandering through the dark labyrinth of his life.

**Keywords:** alienation, existential problems, inner conflict, identity crisis, foreignness, rootless.

Introduction

Born on 7 July 1939, Benares, U.P. Arun Joshi was the youngest child of late professor Dr. A.C. Joshi, Vice Chancellor of the Punjab University and benares Hindu University. He had his formal education at Varanasi, Lahore and Jalandhar. After completing his intermediate course, he got a scholarship from U.S.A. to pursue higher studies. He obtained a degree in engineering from the University of Kansas in 1959. He 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.

With the publication of his very first novel *The Foreigner*, Arun Joshi emerged on the Indian English Literary horizon..His obsession with human predicament and identity and existential crises distinguished him from other Indian English novelists. Arun Joshi's career began with the publication of *The Foreigner* in 1968. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*(1971), *The Apprentice*(1974), *The Last Labyrinth*(1981), and *The City and The River*(1990). He has to his credit the collection of stories *The Survivor*(1975), *The Only American From*

Our Village, The Homecoming. He won the prestigious SahityaAkademi Award for his fourth novel *The Last Labyrinth* in 1982. In his statement, he has said that he “essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of himself.”

Joshi’s novels probe into the dark and innermost issues of the human mind, illuminate the hidden corners of the physical and mental make-up of the characters. In his fictional world Joshi tries his level best to delineate the predicament of the modern man who is confronted by the self and the question of his existence. Joshi visualizes the inner crisis of the modern man and gets convinced that the most besetting problems that man faces today are the problems of self like alienation, identity crisis, sense of void and existential dilemma. When he handles the problems of self, Joshi is careful enough not to forget our cultural heritage, and imperishable moral values. Being an original talent, Joshi explores the deeper into the moral and spiritual crisis of contemporary Indians. The novel, *The Foreigner* explores self and brings to a central focus the way in which the self tries to assess its involvement in the alienation from the family and society.

Joshi’s characters are mentally disturbed and filled with despair, self hatred and self pity for they regard themselves as strangers in the physical world. Isolated from the self as well as society and family Joshi’s characters are forlorn and tear themselves away from the velvety embrace of their society and live like strangers.

The present paper makes attempt to focus on the self created alienation of modern man in the mundane world. His novel presents the dilemma of modern man groping through the dark realities of life.

Joshi is concerned with the predicament of modern man and sensitively alive to the various dimensions of pressure exerted by the complex character and demands of the society in which contemporary man is destined to live. The awareness of rootlessness and strangeness and consequential quest for a meaningful self is the keynote of Joshi’s novels. The sense of alienation and voids experienced by the principal character. Modern man finds himself estranged not only from

his fellow-men but also from himself, having nothing to fall back upon in moments of crisis. He suffers from sense of void and meaninglessness. In discussing the theme of alienation in Arun Joshi’s novels, we are mainly concerned with alienation from society which is the most prevalent kind of alienation and secondly his alienation from his own self.

His protagonists are self centered persons prone to self-pity and adopt policy of escapism. In spite of their weaknesses they are however quite eager and anxious in their genuine search for the better understanding of life and to achieve the fulfillment through the meaningful life.

Joshi’s first novel, *The Foreigner* depicts the alienation of the protagonist SindiOberoi 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 reason for the identity conflict. This novel reveals the human sufferings and agony arising due to the rapid advancement of modern world where moral values and emotions are getting replaced by the practical attitude of people. The novel is a story of SindiOberoi, a student of Mechanical Engineering. Arun Joshi exhibits the mental trauma of loneliness through the psychological conflict in the character of Sindi, in his quest for meaningful life through the relationships.

The protagonist, SindiOberoi, born of an English mother and an Indian father who died when he was only four, he was brought up by his uncle in Kenya. He was educated in East Africa, London and America. He was denied of parental love at the very childhood age. So, he did not feel any kind of love or affection towards his parents. Sindi had felt some kind of security when his uncle was alive. But after his death the security was destroyed. He grew up as a parentless child who missed the childhood affection and care of parent enables the tender child to establish a meaningful relationship with the external world. To him the memory of his parents is “the story of those strangers whose only reality was a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs.”(11) It is not surprising that he finds himself “tired of living” and “contemplating suicide”(165) at such a tender age. Denied of love, care, security and

cultural roots, Sindi grows with a cleft in his personality and becomes a rootless. His orphaned childhood generated in him a deep sense of emotional insecurity. He grows into a wayward man and finally becomes a wanderer alien to his own cultural roots and his soil.

Against this back ground of emotional rootlessness, the various incidents of his life appear more comprehensible. This vibrant intellectual moved from Nairobi where he is born to London where he studies, then, to Saho where he works as a dish-washer and barman. Then he went to Scotland where he works at a small village library and discusses the religion, God and mysticism with a catholic priest. After that he studies for six years at Boston where he meets June and Babu. Finally, he moved to Delhi to settle down but fails to establish a sense of meaningful rapport with the world. His parentage and early life made him a perfect 'foreigner' a man who does not belong to anywhere. Even in Delhi he feels an outsider. He makes evaluation of his own condition: "...I am perfect example of an Indian who pretended to be a foreigner and behaved as one."(130)

"I was considered quite misfit. My foreign background stood against me." He is a born foreigner, he an alien everywhere physically and mentally. He is a wanderer without moorings and a sense of belonging anywhere. Even when he gets Ph.D. degree, his regret is that no education and degrees can teach one how to live. Thus the protagonist, SindiOberoi is a restless and uprooted today's modern man indicating the influence of urbanization and industrialization on modern man living in twentieth century. He also calls himself "an uprooted young man in the latter half of the twentieth century who has become detached from everything except from himself." He becomes totally alienated from society. In this modern world materialistic and selfish consideration dominates man's life and higher values of life find no place in human life.

SindiOberoi's story is a reflection of human predicament in an indifferent world where people think only practically. His dialogues with Mr. Khemka reflect his restlessness and disturbed condition of his mind. He thinks himself everywhere

a foreigner. He finds no interest in social affairs and believes only in aloofness resulting in loneliness. He thinks that his life is meaningless without any trace of his own identity. He makes relationships with a number of women but with June is brought face to face with his hypocrisy, vanity, cowardice and stupidity. He defines it by developing intimacy with two young women, Anna and Kathi, as his association with them taught him to practice detachment and non-involvement in human relationships. But this intimacy does not last much. He develops an involvement with June Blythe, an attractive American girl. He fails in his determination not to get involved. But he believes that his involvement is the root cause of his emotional problems. He remains uninvolved to June's insistent love appeals and tries to drive her away into the arms of BabuRaoKhemka. In his best efforts to maintain detachment SindiOberoi leaves Boston and takes up a job in New York. So he adopts detachment attitude by which he can face the challenges of life in a much better way. His attitude to life and love is in total disregard of the values of human relations which leads to his obsession with non-involvement. He becomes devoid of emotions. The feeling of aloneness does not leave him even for a minute and he survives even after unexpected turns of events. He cannot love anybody except himself. The consequences of his practice of detachment in America, compels him to leave the country and to go to India. He hopes to live in India, the life different from New York and Boston. He believes:

"Like many of my bread I believed erroneously that I could escape from a part of myself by hopping from one land mass to another.(176)

The new development in his life was not casual. He accepts a job in Khemka's factory. He gets involved with Sheila in spite of his commitment to detachment. But finally finds himself alone, perturbed and brooding over his past life and anxious of his future. In the following words he expresses the truth of his life.

"I saw myself as I had always been, an uprooted young man ... who had become detached from everything except himself."

Sindi finds no purpose in his life. He was leading a life without any purpose. Everywhere his life is the same thing for him. He consoles his divided soul as:

“Who knows where the road will lead? Only to fool can say.”(182)

In loneliness and despair Sindi is a self-seeker and absurd man and an existential character. “You have a God; you had roots in the soil you lived upon. Look at me. I have no roots. I have no system of morality.... You ask me why I am not ambitious; well I have no reason to be. Even I don't have a reason to live.”

Sindi becomes a young man dwelling in despair, detachment and indifference who is uprooted from his culture and social affairs. This kind of his life becomes a part and parcel of his personality. However young Sindi could not resist himself from being involved with a beautiful and benign lady June Blythe. Their affinity reached to that stage that they get involved in enjoying sex. But all the time, he is afraid of getting possessed and possessing by her. He is fully conscious about the pains and sufferings which he received and gave to others. He adopted detachment to shield his sensitive and vulnerable human self.

“The journey had been long and tedious and still was not over.”(221)

His sense of insecurity, fear of involvement and the memory of experiences with Anna and Kathi stood in the way of marriage. As a result of his disinterest in marriage, June drew herself towards BabuKhemka. But after knowing that June had had illicit relationship with Sindi, Babu commits suicides. Again, Sindi thinks himself responsible for Babu's suicide and instead of Babu he should have committed suicide. Sindi also makes his pursuit of detachment responsible for June's death during abortion and Babu's accidental death due to losing control over driving in tension. Babu, son of the industrialist makes no compromise with the reality that June had had close intimacy with his Kenyan-Indian friend SindiOberoi. These incidents creates void in his life and predicament of situation persuades his life. Babu's sister Sheila once told him “You are the saddest man I have ever known.”(140) Sindi himself muses over his foreignness and

confessed “I was cynical and exhausted grown old before time, weary with my own loneliness.”(31) Meenakshi Mukherjee describes the hero of the novel *The Stranger* as a ‘perennial outsider.’(22) Thus throughout the plot crisis of identity becomes evident in various incidents.

Thus during his search for meaningful life and mental peace he suffers a lot. He is exposed to the harsh realities of materialistic Western civilization where he tries to discover himself but find in further bewilderment and alienation into himself. He himself calls his search for peace and meaningful as a journey of innocence to the experiences in the mad, bad and absurd materialistic world.

“I had started my life as a confused adolescent, awesomely engrossed with myself, yearning for wisdom and the peace that comes with it.”(22)

SindiOberoi is rootless, restless existentialist character facing one crisis after another. His relations with Anna and Kathy taught him to practice detachment and non-involvement in human emotions. The broken relationship disturbs him psychologically and remains in fear of getting involved with June Blythe, an American girl in spite of his strong determination not to get involved. He knows that involvement generate pains. So he fights with himself to escape from another affair. His self-imposed alienation is evident through his reply to June's question “where he was from.” He had misconception of the term detachment for his own sake. It was just for avoiding some commitments which drives Babu and June towards death. His remorseful feelings are reflected through his words: “All along I had acted out of lust, greed and selfishness and they had applauded my wisdom when I had sought only detachment. I had driven a man to his death.”(6)

He realizes his mistake of rejecting June's love which could have proved last emotional support for him. His sense of non-involvement proves fatal. Also he fails to meet June before her death during abortion. This incident upsets him. He becomes miserable blaming himself responsible for his beloved June's death and Babu's accidental death. He was experiencing the consequences of his

detachment. Through his life his words and behaviour create the same impression in all those with whom he meets. So he started his search for mental peace and to lead a meaningful life. But finally, in this modern materialistic world he remains a frustrated and cynical man alienated from not only society but also from his own soul. His self-imposed alienation and detachment create void and loneliness in his life to lead. The different manifestations of alienation create for the identity crisis. The consciousness and guilt and alienation has been illustrated through the life of the characters like Sindi, June, Babu and Mr. Khemka.

S.P. Swain rightly observes that "His responses to life are coloured by his childhood deprivation of love from his parents. Being brought up in a loveless world, he harbours in him a deep sense of insecurity and unreality." In his vain search for the essence of his existence and the relation of his self to the pulsating rhythm he begins to depend upon experiments in which his innocence begins to be rubbed. The three syndromes of alienation such as recessive, socially disinterested and socially ineffective identified by Sushil Kumar Sharma after Elizabeth B. Hurlock, were visible in his psyche.

#### **Conclusion**

Almost an alienated man himself, in his own words, Joshi has portrayed in all his novels the inner crisis and existentialist search of the modern man. Through the character of SindiOberoi, he tries to instill social, cultural, moral and spiritual values in the people of contemporary age. Thus, the protagonist SindiOberoi is a real example of modern man in the contemporary society. His predicament is a reflection of modern man's condition in the materialistic world. He suffers a lot due to a warring East and West cultures. He finds himself lonely, dejected, secluded and frustrated and ultimately alienated from society and from himself due to his self-imposed detachment. He is caught in his inner conflict. During his search for meaningful life and mental peace, he gets nothing but loses everything in relations. He has no longer any sense of security because of his isolation from his own family and the society. He finds no answer to his self generated questions. He cannot give justice to himself and to those who are with him. His search for mental

peace and some valuable purpose of life ends in vain. His self-imposed alienation and detachment create void in his life to lead.

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