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## ARUN JOSHI: MAN AND HIS WORKS

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### ABSTRACT

Arun Joshi, who is ranked with the great masters of contemporary Indian fiction in English, belongs to the coterie of modern novelists who believe that reality lies within the consciousness of isolated individuals. As a writer, Joshi does not focus on social or political problems. Nor does he try to escape from the world of human conflicts and seek aesthetic pleasure in an imaginary world. An artist of great psychological perception, Joshi probes deep into the hidden contours of human psyche in order to elicit the mysterious truths of human existence. His works may not have the depth and solidity of Raja Rao, the comic vein or brooding intensity of R.K.Narayan, he may even be making no attempt, like Anand or Bhattacharya or Nahal, to give a cross section of society as a whole, yet his torch seems to light up the darkness in every direction with its fitful illuminations. One gets an extraordinary sense of the infinite ramifications of human life, its unpredictableness, its conclusiveness.

**Key Words:** Political problem, conflict, aesthetic pleasure, perception, ramification.

Arun Joshi, a management executive by training and profession, born at Benaras, Uttar Pradesh on July 7, 1939 as the youngest son of Dr.A.C.Joshi and Mrs.Sumitra Joshi, had an excellent academic career which includes an engineering degree from Kansas University, U.S.A., and an M.S. degree in Industrial Management from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, U.S.A. After working at a mental hospital in the United States for a short period, Joshi returned to India in 1961. Soon, he joined the Delhi Cloth & General Mills Co., Delhi as the chief of its Recruitment and Training Department. He held the position of Head of the DCM Corporate Performance Assessment Cell, and Secretary, DCM Board of Management. At present, Joshi is the Executive Director of Shri Ram Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources, New Delhi. He is also associated with the Shri Ram Centre for Art & Culture, and Hindu College, Delhi, as Member of their

Governing Bodies. Joshi has set up his own industries, manufacturing products such as diesel engines, machine tools, foundry products and automotive parts.

Joshi made a mark as an Indian English writer with the publication of his first novel, *The Foreigner* (1968). The rest of his novels—*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1973), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), and *The City and the River* (1990) have also been well received in the literary circles. In 1979, at the invitation of the East-West Centre, Joshi participated in the World writers' Conference held at Honolulu, Hawaii, U.S.A. In 1983, Joshi won the prestigious Sahitya Akademy Award for his novel, *The Last Labyrinth*. Apart from the novels mentioned above, Joshi has also published a collection of ten short stories entitled *The Survivor* (1975). Another short story, "*The Only American from our Village*," has manifested itself in *Quest* (Mar-Apr,

1975) and also in Contemporary Indian English Stories edited by Madhusudan Prasad. Himself an entrepreneur, Joshi has also published two books on the business world: *Lala Shri Ram: A Study in Entrepreneurship and Industrial Management* (1975), and *Remembering Lala Shri Ram: Reminiscences* on his 100th Birthday (Edited, 1984).

Kushwant Singh, well-known journalist and writer, has described Joshi's maiden venture, *The Foreigner*, as a compelling work of fiction. In this novel, Joshi portrays the "spiritual odyssey"<sup>1</sup> of an uprooted young man living in the latter half of the twentieth century, who remains detached from everything except himself. The protagonist, Sindi Oberoi, finds himself a foreigner wherever he is—in London, in Boston or in New Delhi. The novel, which can be considered as a study in alienation, is largely autobiographical. For Joshi, writing is not a conscious process. He maintains: "Some parts of *The Foreigner*, my first book, were written when I was a student in America. I gave it up then and completed it later in 1966."<sup>2</sup>

Joshi has no self-image as a writer. "My novels," admits Joshi, "are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of myself. As such they have nothing to do with my profession. If I did not write, I imagine I would use some other medium to carry on my exploration."<sup>3</sup> Sujatha Mathai describes him as "a writer in disguise, ambivalent about his identity."<sup>4</sup> Joshi enjoys writing, which for him, is an absolute necessity or a mystical urge geared towards self-expression. He believes that writing is unreal—a dream, and he finds himself a stranger to his own books. This testifies to the statement made by the author in an interview that *The Last Labyrinth* is a novel that he does not understand himself.

Almost an alienated man himself, in his own words, Joshi has portrayed in all his novels, the inner crisis and the existentialist search of the modern man. His heroes are alienated beings in the quest for the meaning of existence. Joshi's second novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, is a study in the total alienation of its hero, Billy Biswas, from the modern bourgeois society of India. This is a most unusual novel in which, as B.G.R.Krishnama puts it, the

normal and the abnormal, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the natural and the supernatural rub shoulders with one another. We find Billy being driven by a great force—a primitive force of his unconscious self—which urges him to leave the civilized world of greed and hypocrisy, and live like a primitive man in a primitive world. By responding to the tribal girl Bilasia's call, Billy succeeds in discovering that bit of himself which he had searched for all his life. But Billy's search, unlike that of Sindi, ends up in tragedy when he is shot dead by a havildar. Joshi depicts the chastity and simplicity of an authentic life in a primitive society, the virtues of which may "act as a corrective to our money-based culture."<sup>5</sup> Interpreting this novel, Joshi remarks:

It is very difficult to explain this novel. Tribals are very civilized according to mine and Billy Biswas's understanding. It is the post-Independence pseudo-Western values that he rejects. The book is about a mystical urge, a compulsion which makes Billy go away. In a number of our legends and religious texts people go away to forests to heal themselves spiritually. Possibly that's what I am suggesting, though not consciously.... Billy's death is metaphorical. The modern Indian city is disoriented and kills sincerity. A woman who enjoys dancing might be married off to a person who does not let her dance after marriage. This kind of killing goes on when the social organism does not know its values.

We only understand the value of money and power.<sup>6</sup> Joshi's third novel, *The Apprentice* is a severe indictment of the tyranny of a society without norms, without direction and without, perhaps, a purpose. It is a novel totally different in tone from his other novels. In this novel, the narrator-protagonist Rathan Rathore exposes his own perfidious character in the form of an internal monologue. Joshi has also introduced an imaginative listener whom the narrator addresses frequently, so as to relieve the readers of the tedium of sustained narration. Rendered in the confessional form, this novel has received the most critical attention. It delineates the plight of the contemporary Everyman, and as a "fictional study of the anatomy and dynamics of the

almost omnipresent corruption in the country, *The Apprentice* is a powerful indictment. The human story and the stark message both come through.<sup>7</sup> But some critics accord with the idea that, from the characterization point of view, the narrator-protagonist fails to evoke sufficient interest in himself." He is full of bland platitudes with no trace of humour whatsoever.... The language lacks freshness and immediacy.... The frequent use of either a romantic reverie or stream of consciousness device makes the narrator's soliloquies sound like ravings of maniac."<sup>8</sup>

This novel is reminiscent of Camus' *The Fall*, but the atmosphere created by Joshi seems to be unrealistic and melodramatic. In the words of Mr.P.P.Mehta, the "sustained monologue is attractive and interesting, but the sentiments sound a false note."<sup>9</sup> The protagonist, Rathan Rathore, who finds himself alienated from his own true self in an attempt at adapting to the ways of the world, differs from the other heroes Sindi and Billy in so far as his intellectual level is much lower. Joshi acknowledges that this novel with its cause-and effect structure gave him the maximum trouble, especially where language was concerned: "I felt awkward putting English in the mouths of the characters who don't normally speak it and had to develop a structure where the reader is not distracted by language. I chose the monologue—it is a difficult style."<sup>10</sup> Rathan's life is a journey from "innocence to experience and also from self-love to self-remorse."<sup>11</sup>

The *Last Labyrinth* pursues the theme which Joshi has earlier dealt with—alienation and the crisis of identity. We find Som Bhaskar, a twenty five year old modern millionaire who is guided by reason and not by faith, haunted by mysterious voices. He suffers from voids within, as he puts it in the narrative, and he finds himself existentially alone, even though he has a beautiful and understanding wife, and two children. Som too quests after a meaning in life, but his search becomes desperately complicated because of his yearning to have the best of both the worlds—the world of matter, and the world of spirit. In this novel Joshi juxtaposes the world of reality with that of the world of dreams, illusions and doubts. The setting of the novel frequently shifts from Bombay and Benaras, and as such, *The Last Labyrinth* can be

seen as "a tale of two cities, Benaras and Bombay—one symbolizing Western, rational, industrial and technological, and the other Oriental, occult, feudal and treacherous."<sup>12</sup>

Arun Joshi's novels thus re-enact the dilemma of the modern man, groping through the dark alleys of life and reality. His heroes—Sindi, Billy, Rathan and Som—are all 'foreigners' and 'outsiders' making desperate attempts to reach a rapport with the world. Prof. Srinivasa Iyengar considers Joshi's novels as almost a single work in progress. While the outer semblance undergoes chameleonic changes, the hapless individual remains basically the same. His heroes, for all their affluence and education, are but prisoners of their predicament. They, in fact, represent the "universal man, alienated, fumbling in the dark for a spiritual oasis."<sup>13</sup>

Joshi has, as a writer, been influenced by the Bhagavad Gita and the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, the influence of the Western existentialist writers like Sartre and Camus notwithstanding. He admits that he has read *The Plague and The Outsider* and has been influenced by them. Joshi is also attracted to the figure of Christ, and is interested in Christian thought.

The ethos of Arun Joshi is intrinsically Indian. Joshi personally feels that his earlier novels—*The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*—are primarily concerned with religious issues, the problems of an essentially Hindu mind. This is to some extent true of his next two novels also. Whereas *The Apprentice* extols the philosophy of the Hindu scriptures and also that of Mahatma Gandhi, reinforcing the value of humility and self-purification, *The Last Labyrinth* "assimilates the existential anxiety, the Karmik principles, the longing for the vitals of life in the mystical urge of Som Bhaskar."<sup>14</sup> Joshi clearly states that there are two things that he has consciously tried to convey through his novels:

I strongly believe that individual actions have effects on others and oneself. So one cannot afford to continue with an irresponsible existence but has to commit oneself at some point. From that angle one can say that Hinduism is a highly existentialist-oriented philosophy since it

attaches so much importance to the right way to live (to exist). Secondly, it is very difficult to steer one's way through life without God, or at least concepts like right or wrong.<sup>15</sup>

The theme of Joshi's latest novel, *The City and the River* (1990), is strikingly different from his other novels. This can be considered as a political novel reflecting the Indian reality, though the author has chosen an imaginary locale as its setting. The story revolves around the Grand Master who is ascertained to become the unchallenged king of the city, which he rules by the river. The information given to him by the palace Astrologer about the existence of an old prophecy which predicts the arrival of a king invigorates his determination. He issues a decree from the palace, announcing the beginning of a new era to be known as 'The Era of Ultimate Greatness.' It enjoins the people to beware of the enemy within and the enemy without, and they are filled with fear and foreboding.

The prophecy, however, is read quite differently by the Hermit of the Mountain, who is the Astrologer's fellow disciple. He believes that there is nothing inevitable about the prophecy: "The hand that made it believes, above all, in man's capacity to change his fate. So even if it speaks of the coming of a king, men can so conduct themselves, so choose, that the king does not come. Or the king that comes is of the right kind."<sup>16</sup> He presumes that God is the king of the world which He has created. The fulfillment of the Grand Master's dream is debilitated, to some extent, by his own councilors who are interested in the pursuance of their own intents and purposes. It is further complicated by the defiance of men like Bhumiputra and his supporters, and by the rebellion of the boatmen who forswear the supremacy of the Grand Master. The boatmen consider themselves to be the "children of the river, and to the river, and river alone do they hold allegiance. They believe, unfortunately, with their hearts, and for their beliefs they are willing to die."<sup>17</sup>

Although acclaimed more as a novelist, and his novels more popular, Joshi is an accomplished short story writer as well. At any rate, some of his stories are accurate and trenchant than his novels.

Joshi's distinction as a short story writer lies in his themes—both in their choice and in their treatment. Through his stories, Joshi depicts the contemporary situation as seen and felt by the individual who is a victim of the corrupt social order.

*The Gherao* is the story of an age-old Principal, Ravi Mathur, who had participated in the national movement. As a student he had to undergo five years imprisonment since he fought for freedom, not for himself, but for his countrymen. He is disheartened and appalled at the deteriorating values of the modern students who try to destroy that world of freedom which millions like him toiled to create. He feels depressed and humiliated when gheraoed by his students whom he considers as his own children. He takes leave and dies of heart attack.

The theme of Joshi's short story, *The Survivor*, is akin to that of his novel entitled *The Apprentice*. After five years in America, the narrator-protagonist of this story, Kewal Kapur, takes up teaching in the University. But soon he finds out that the salary is not good enough to meet the ever growing demands of his wife. Later on, through the influence of his father-in-law, he secures a job in the public relations department, where he is expected to answer complaints which come from the public. Unable to bear the tedium of his mechanical work, he tries to find amusement in watching movies and listening to film songs in the transistor. He gets hooked up on the Indian films, watching twenty movies a month. One day he even goes out with a girl called Mary or Lucy or Daisy and takes her to a tenth-rate hotel. Kewal loses interest in his job, and one day he is sacked, again due to the influence of his father-in-law. Moreover, Kewal loses all his money deposited in the bank, for his wife withdraws it all.

Finally, Kewal gets into the company of Penalty Rao—a thief, a smuggler, a pickpocket, a politician and a pimp. On a Divali night, urged by a desire to see his daughter, Kewal along with Penalty Rao and his friend, a taxi driver goes to his father-in-law's house. As Kewal goes up to see his daughter, his friends rob all the jewellery of the people present there. Later, they go to the Marne Beach where three of them have drinks and they yell out prayers for surviving them that night. Kewal's prayer shows

Joshi's attempt at social satire and the projection of the materialism prevailing in the modern Indian society:

I am a survivor, gentlemen, of card parties, of wedding receptions, five-year plans; of nosy neighbours, conjugal bliss, well-meaning friends and bloody-minded bosses. I am a survivor of life insurance schemes, stock exchanges and family planning techniques. In brief, gentlemen, I am a survivor of that fantastic racket that passes for the MODERN INDIAN SOCIETY. I am a survivor of mandacious mothers and relentless fathers, of two-penny politicians, of lawyers and doctors. Above all, I am the survivor of that greatest disaster of them all: THE MODERN INDIAN WOMAN.<sup>18</sup>

*The Only American from our Village* centres around Dr. Khanna, the most outstanding immigrant physicist at the University of Wisconsin, who has come to visit India—the country he had left fifteen years earlier. His lectures at various seminars and conferences are a great success. His wife, Joanne, and their two sons are worshipped by Dr. Khanna's relatives whom they have never seen before, and for whom they have brought Gillette razors, pop records and a mass of one dollar neck-ties. The four-week trip goes about smoothly until Khanna meets Radhey Mohan who sells court paper in front of the District Courts. Khanna's father, Kundan Lal and Radhey Mohan were childhood friends who had gone to the same school and sat at the same desk. Kundan Lal was a brilliant student, who stood third in the state and won a scholarship for higher studies. He did well at college too, took up a job somewhere outside his hometown and returned to his village soon after his retirement. Radhey Mohan reminisces that Kundan Lal was very proud of his son, Khanna, who had settled in America, and told everyone about his achievements:

He used to say you would be a big government man when you came back. He would say you were coming back in one year, in two years, any time.... He said you were the only American from our village. I asked him once what was so great about

being the only American from our village. He said it was an honour.<sup>19</sup>

Radhey Mohan tells Khanna about the expectations his father had of his son who had promised to send him a ticket to visit America. Frustrated at not receiving the long-awaited ticket, Kundan Lal alienated himself from his friends, and turned religious.

The old man further narrates how when Kundan Lal was ill and dying, he revisited the school where they had studied together. It was the month of May and very hot. While returning, Khanna's father crossed the boiling sand of cho with dhak leaves tied to his naked feet—a repetition of what he used to do as a school boy with no money for a pair of shoes. By the time he reached home, he had high fever and died the next day. Hearing this, Dr. Khanna winced, but his perfect training in the new civilization made him calmly remark that he was very sorry to hear of the death of his father. But the knowledge of the way his father died shattered his personality. To a psychiatrist Dr. Khanna confides that he has periods of great burning in his feet. His output of research since this incident has been zero, and he has "generally come to be known as the man who does nothing but stare at his feet."<sup>20</sup>

The themes of the rest of his short stories are also of an amazing and pleasant variety: the suppressed passion of teenage girls for the world of young men (*The Frontier Mail is Gone*), old men who long for youth, love and sex (*The Intruder in the Discotheque*), teen-agers who do nothing but eve-teasing (*The Eve-Teasers*), a young servant who tries to rape his mistress (*The Servant*), heartless modern manufacturers who are ready to choose any perfidious method for their sales promotion *A Trip for Mr. Lele*, a picture of life in which men can prosper only through hypocrisy and corruption (*Harmik*), a contrast between war as it really is to a man who has been in it, and war as it is to those who read and talk about it from a comfortable distance (*The Homecoming*), and so on. Joshi is a typically Indian in the treatment and choice of his themes, and through them he presents a cross-section of the contemporary Indian society in as straightforward and interesting a way as possible.

Another short story entitled *The Boy with the Flute* is about a wealthy fifty year old businessman who belongs to a "social class whose influence was supreme and showed no sign of abating."<sup>21</sup> In the world of commerce Sethi's name is legend and he considers his duty to preserve it at all costs. But we find him caught up in the labyrinth of his amassed wealth and an obsessive fear of death, which he calls primeval terror, overpowers him. In an effort at escaping it, he finds himself in the company of a mistress. Finding her sexually irresistible, Sethi smothers her with valuable presents only to find her scheming to extract as much money from him as possible. On a stormy night he breaks off his relationship with her, and feels "exorcised of the evil that had haunted his footsteps."<sup>22</sup>

On the way to his place of residence, he falls into the clutches of a young man who robs him of all that he has, and imprisons him in an unknown place. Finding himself helpless, and convinced that he was dying, Sethi remembers and feverishly chants the prayers which his mother had taught him and which he had forgotten to utter for more than thirty years then: *Asato ma sadgamaya; Tamaso ma jyothirgamaya; Mrityormamritam gamaya.* (from evil lead me to good; from darkness lead me to light; from death lead me to deathlessness). Mysteriously enough, a boy, a flute-player with his face dark with soot, frees him. The boy disappears soon after the event, and all attempts made by Mr. Sethi to trace him are unfruitful.

In a confused society, a society without norms and without purpose, one succumbs to temptations under the threats of insecurity, anxiety and fear. Through the appearance of the boy with the flute, Joshi seems to symbolize the fact that the insoluble problems of life can be expounded only through faith in God or religion, beyond the logic of science and reason.

Joshi does not accord with the idea that the novel is more effective a literary form than the short story, and in his opinion, "Each has its own place. In my case it is the theme which determines whether it be a short story or a novel. For example, I wrote a short story called "The Gherao" which was about students gheraoing a principal. Thematically, I would

not like to handle a novel about the academic world which I don't know about; so a short story."

Although Joshi has not written much, he has done it effectively and powerfully, revealing himself as a good craftsman of fiction. According to Prof. Srinivasa Iyengar, the chief living authority on Indian English literature, Arun Joshi's is an unusual talent engaged in the art of fiction, and there is in his work the fusion of intellect, integrity and power of writing. In his short stories, as in his novels, Joshi projects the crisis of the modern urbanized world with its dehumanizing impact on the people at large. Apart from the contemporary relevance of his themes, subtle characterization, and the authenticity of his scenes, the significance of his works lies in the ease of his style, and his genteel taste. Joshi exhibits a rare depth of observation of the human nature, and the power and strength of his realistic portrayal makes his works all the more convincing.

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