



Analysis Of Illusion And Existential Problems In Arun Joshi's The Foreigner

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to analyze how Arun Joshi adds a new dimension to the genre of Indian fiction in English by introducing the theme of alienation in his novels. His fictional world is characterized by the alienation of the individual, shown through a crisis of the self in an emotionally disturbed environment. The story is about a young man called Sindi Oberoi who has twice removed from his country of birth. Since he has no strong bondage and he calls himself an alien. This term is an apt one both physically as well as metaphorically like Hemingway's American hero fighting in the Italian battle in A Farewell to Arms, Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner*, an Indian Kenyan who returns to India after many years in the West, lacks involvement in the life he heads. At the end his wish to achieve tranquility, non attachment turns out to be a self – delusion.

Key words: alienation, immigrant, obsession, suffering, bondage

INTRODUCTION

The Foreigner opens in a morgue where Sindi Oberoi has to identify his dead friend, Babu Rao Khamka. Having gripped the reader's attention, Joshi goes not to recreate Oberoi's background and his relationship with Khamka, throwing together the past and the present, the real and the remembered, the world of imagination and of reality. Of mixed parentage, Sindi has to be haunted by the reality of rootlessness. The inner fight in him makes him refuse to accept the proposal of marriage with June. In this scene, in which June and her mother expect Oberoi to agree to marry and he refuses is very touching. He is indirectly responsible for Khamka's death in a car accident.

On his return to India, Oberoi, still a foreigner, is given a job by Khamka's father in his firm. It is Sheila, Khamka's sister who gives him a sense of commitment in life Oberoi ruminates:

Circumstances and events had led to my detachment from all of them. But, as Sheila had pointed out I couldn't be detached from the world and remain attached to myself.
(164)

When Khemka's firm faces dissolution, Oberoi is given a basis for action and commitment. Till then Sindi has been very careful not to get involved in anything. Whether it is love or marriage he wants to keep himself away from any commitment. The casual involvements with Anna and Kathy while he was in England have taught him a lot.

Arun Joshi has drawn the atmosphere of Boston with a neat hand. Boston is not only a city, but a state of mind. Joshi uses a lot of motifs to strengthen the central design. A good example is the loneliness of Indian students in America; this is contrasted with Oberoi's self-imposed alienation. Atmosphere is presented with a similar purpose; the bleak chilly evenings serve as an appropriate background to the prevailing mood of the characters. June's remarks are almost accurate to this aspect of Sindi. She remarks:

There is something strange about you, you know, something distant. I would guess that when people are with you they do not feel like they are with a human being... but I have a feeling that you would be a foreigner anywhere. (33)

Sindi makes relationships with a series of women; but with June, he has come face to face with his hypocrisy and stupidity. He has been nourishing illusions and pretending detachment. He admits; "I tried to speculate about things objectively not realizing that objectivity was another form of vanity" (126). Sindi's sense of alienation deepens after the deaths of June and Babu. And he feels that, "Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it" (206).

Joshi's Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist of *The Foreigner*, is a product of crossroads of the east and the west. His dilemma in any action either love or marriage stems from socio – psychological bases. After the deaths of his parents, Sindi has been deprived of parental love. In the reverse case, he does not care for their images and shows utter indifference when he is reminded of them. He tells Mr.Khemka, "For the hundredth time I related the story of those strangers; whose only reality was a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs" (11). Sindi recalls those days of his parents when they were killed in an air crash while he needed them most. He feels some kind of security with his uncle but his death makes him miserable and he is forced to lead a life of a foreigner. He finds himself insecure and without an anchor:

I had not felt like that when my uncle was living. It was not that I loved him very much or anything-as a matter of fact we rarely exchanged letters, but the thought that he moved about in that small house on the outskirts of Nairobi gave me a feeling of having an anchor. After his death, the security was destroyed. (61-62).

Sindi has been denied parental love, family affection and cultural roots. He grows into a wayward man and finally becomes a wanderer-alien to his own culture. He finds no longer any security and his sense of being an outsider remains to be static. His restlessness, the mental agencies that he suffers and his own predicament compel him to think as such.

Sindi has some mission, some purpose, some desire in life but he has completely withdrawn himself from all such pursuits of life. He does not like to be an involved man with all sorts of natural activities, since he has never been guided in his earlier life to lead such a life. Without such guidance either from his parents or his uncle one knows well that it has been a natural life to him. He has formed his own ideas regarding life. Sindi is more on the defensive and withdrawn self rather than on attacking the odds of life for which he had not been trained or taught. Sindi wants to escape pains and as such he tries his best but he fails. He tries his utmost to get out to attachment but he is unable to do so.

Sindi Oberoi remains an alien throughout his life. He undergoes various changes and a number of bitter experiences right from his life in Kenya, London and Boston. While he is in Kenya, he plans once for suicide and when he comes to London, his dull life gets a little life in his love with Anna and Kathy. Anna is a different sort of person who seeks her lost youth and love for Oberoi, but in response, Sindi gives her a sense of illusion and goes closer to Kathy. Such experiences disturb him

intensely. He also knows intimately the relationship with June and Babu in Boston. He takes a new turn when he opts for June. June, on the other hand, wants to love, marry and create a home for her. When Sindi learns her intention, his defenses of detachment die down.

Sindi tries to defend his standpoint with regard to involvement. Sindi undergoes self-analysis. He blames American culture for the eventual disturbance in his life, the disorder he undergoes, the obsession he faces. He realizes his position as an outsider. He suffers a lot but never takes it otherwise. He maintains, "There is no end to suffering, no end to the struggle between good and evil" (41). Sindi is morally responsible for the death of both June and Babu. Though he feels a sense of guilt and self-contradiction, he is once again helpless in the hands of existence.

Sindi, in course of times feels an insecure man and harbours a deep-rooted feeling of reality. He tries his best to balance his self and the external world. He wants to justify his identity through his contacts with others; but loses both individuality and identity. He suffers the psychosis of engulfment. His relationship with Anna, Kathy and June fails, as he cannot make out a complete union in any case.

Sindi has a different and diffident sort of outlook when it comes to the affair of love or marriage. He is preoccupied with the sense of possession of a girl like June. While he tries to preserve his identity, he is terrified with the fear of being possessed. He also fears to be united in marriage because he foresees his existence as a doomed one. Sindi works on the theory that "one should be able to love without wanting to possess" (124). In between attachment and detachment, he finally understands that detachment does not mean an escape or alienation, it means involvement, devotion and sacrifice. He surrenders to himself as an existential hero and settles with the business with Sheila and with himself. Dr. Hari Mohan Prasad rightly remarks, "From Boston to Delhi has been a journey from alienation to arrival, from selfishness sacrifice, from an anomic responsible to himself to a member of mankind, from being to becoming" (43).

Sindi Oberoi is presented by Arun Joshi as a miserable man. Nobody in his life would have such a pathetic situation without a father and mother. Sindi has been trained by his uncle to forget such sad feelings. But after the death of his uncle his only connection with the world of humanity, he becomes a man of nothing. Sindi's background compels him for his metaphysical alienation. A peculiar man, Sindi does not belong to anywhere, either to India or Kenya or anywhere else. He is a man drifting always aimlessly on the surface of life without an anchor:

Sindi's only motive in life has been his sense of detachment. He will remind himself very often, "I don't want to get involved" (62). He repeated it to himself many times, whenever he was on the brink of plunging himself into any sort of involvement. Sindi's sense of alienation has started after the death of his last link, in life, that is his uncle in Kenya. He could not rely on anybody to nurture a bright side of life. He is very open to let out his feelings. As he moves on meeting many people like Sheila, Mr. Khemka, his resolve in detachment gets strengthened.

Sindi confronts the universe, which has become disjointed, purposeless and absurd. Instead of giving life its meaning, he leaves that meaning in doubt and suspense. His freedom figures as an existential philosophy. The nausea of life Sindi has been experiencing from his early life and it keeps him restless throughout. Once he feels so exhausted of existing in this world that he even decides to commit suicide. This sickness remains with him even after he joins London University. Though there is nothing like that about the courses, he does well in the examination; but he gets tired and bored with the classroom lectures, which lack a thing about life. He is sad and unhappy because his education does not teach him "how to live". Consequently he accepts an evening job of a dishwasher to gather experience other than that of an engineering student.

Sindi is now a wanderer and anxiously wandering through the maze of his existence for a whole year looking for a purpose in life but it is an attempt in vain. All that appears to him as pleasant and delightful at first, ends in pain and it puzzles. His love affairs with Anna, Kathy and June do not provide him permanent bliss. He foresees danger in them. Sindi's skeptical attitude is born out of

doubt and mistrust. Drive he has; otherwise he could not have successfully completed the project. It could have brought him a patent, had he remained in America. But his soul is ill formed casting a shadow of impermanence.

Like a wise man or a man of practical sense, Sindi wants to love without attachment, without desire and without fooling himself that the objects of his love are indispensable to him or to the world. Love to him is real only when one loves in awareness of death. He knows:

There is another way of loving. You can love without attachment, without desire. You can love without attachment to the objects of your love. You can love without fooling yourself that the things you love are indispensable either to you or to the world. Love is real only when you know that what you love must one day die. (145)

Through all means, Sindi plans and seeks to achieve total detachment in life. He wants to live without attachment. He seeks peace and a capacity to love and withdraw from all action that might cause pain. But he finds it very different to practice. Sindi is spiritually detached from the world, but he is engrossed with his own self.

Sindi's view of life is from the angle of one who has been tossed by the vicissitudes of life. If somebody goes through such violent ordeal, he becomes mature to face the reality. But in the case of Sindi, experiences await his entry inside, but he is brushing aside all such temptations. Thus he is not a wrought metal but an impure ore. He narrates his own mental condition.

Arun Joshi has carefully examined and presented Sindi's motives, conscious or unconscious, in making love to June before and after she is engaged to Babu. Sindi feels love and tenderness for June and even wants to possess her but he is unwilling to marry her, "I was afraid of possessing anybody and I was afraid of being possessed and marriage meant both" (106).

Joshi gives stress on the mysterious nature of life. To him the events are incalculable and uncontrollable. One gets involved inevitably. Sindi also agrees, when he says, "One does not choose one's involvement" (44). The deaths of Babu and June drains out his lingering confidence. A deep sense of internal pain scourges him and he finds as if there is nothing left for him to depend upon. The feeling of nakedness in the hands of existence grows with every passing day and strong urge overtakes him again to wander about the streets of the world. The sense of self-alienation deepens his longing for detachment.

Sindi is once again faced with the problem of putting together all that has happened to him and his coming to grips with life like a typical Sartrean hero, he believes in the temporal nature of life and becomes a petty officer in a firm belonging to a corrupt industrialist, Khemka. There also he assumes his usual role of a stranger. Khemka tries to win him over with money to save himself from the disgrace of arrest and imprisonment. Sindi's decision to move away from Khemka is very shocking. But he is caught into the nets of events and he cannot withdraw. Here he gets the opportunity to practice what he has learnt out of his long quest-action without attachment.

Sindi's main characteristic is his aloofness. He would not mingle with others easily. It is this withdrawal from action that brings in a complicated situation to him. He has to decide in any serious action; but he will sense the danger of future course of action and desist from carrying it on. Naturally he will withdraw himself from the action or the persons connected with the action.

Arun Joshi, thus, presents Sindi Oberoi as a product of the clashes of the western and eastern cultures. He grows into a wayward man and finally becomes a wanderer. He has no longer any sense of security in any of the countries where he is allowed to stay. It is a pity that this sense of being an outsider remains static throughout. Though he has some mission, purpose and desire in life, he has withdrawn himself from action or involvement. Even here however he tries to avoid pain but it finally becomes useless. Thus he has to alienate himself from the society to avoid pain, involvement and its aftermath.

Arun Joshi occupies an important position among the Indian novelist in English. His novels portray the hero's search for self-identity in the existential struggles. Joshi's novels have an autobiographical touch. His protagonist, Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner* reflects a bit of Joshi's own life. Sindi belongs to the upper class Indian society and get higher education in America. Sindi, like Joshi himself, has an engineering degree from an American University and later, in Delhi, he joins Mr. Khemka, an industrialist. Being an acute observer Arun Joshi presents in his novels the conflict between the eastern and western cultures which he had observed as a student in America and England and as a professional in industrial field in India.

Deeply influenced by the western philosophy of existentialism of Camus and Sartre, Joshi depicts the crisis of existence this novel. To him the disjointed, purposeless and absurd universe was the result of the collapse of the age old values; and, moreover, he saw the contemporary man struggling constantly for a way that would help him to face the existential problem in this universe. This protagonist is absolutely puzzled restlessly searching for his roots and trying to know the purpose of his existence on this planet. Modern man, being illusioned, thinks himself reaching his heights as the result of modernization and industrialization.

Arun Joshi's novels are a projection of human predicament and the tormented self of mankind in this indifferent and mysterious universe. Even though he was influenced by the western existentialist writers, Arun Joshi has his roots deep in Indian culture. He has firm faith in the Indian way of life which he suggests in his works. He has tried to highlight some of the constant metaphysical and ethical questions.

Arun Joshi deals with various fictional themes as alienation and involvement, east-west encounter and compromise, existentialism and materialism, and quest and complacency. Through his protagonists, Joshi makes his readers peep into the confused innerself of the contemporary westernized and materialistic man who is spiritually bankrupt. Because of his having doubts about God's existence, he is teased by the constant queries about the purpose of his own existence. He has a spiritual quest for the knowledge of his innerself lost in the labyrinth of life. In the wake of his quest he becomes alienated from his society, this world, and, moreover, even from his ownself. Joshi's protagonists, Sindi and Billy both are alienated fellows. They engage in soul-searching and finally come to know the meaning and purpose of their lives and also have a sense of their true identities. This process of transfiguration, that is, withdrawal from and return to life leads them to purification and perfection. Joshi himself says as a reply to V. Gopal Rao, that "alienation of my novels which I have written so far ultimately leads them back to community. I realized that in my latest novel *The Last Labyrinth* for the first time it does not happen" (R.K. Dhawan 14).

Dealing with the spiritually adventurous journey of a puzzled man in *The Foreigner* Arun Joshi finds the solution in the Upanishads, the Gita and the Gandhian philosophy. The Upanishads exhibit a vision of life that pain and suffering are necessary for progress. According to the Gandhian philosophy human existence is the result of unavoidable suffering and the amount of one's progress is measured in the proportion of one's suffering. Throughout his quest for self-realization, Sindi experiences soul-searing pain and finally, he feels his soul to be coming out renewed, purified and revitalized. He comes to know the purpose of his existence on this planet in search of which he has gone through so many bitter experiences wandering from place to place. Ultimately, accepting the responsibility of running the factory and becoming the saviour of the workers Sindi comes to a very close understanding of the philosophy of Karmayoga propounded in the Gita.

In his novels Arun Joshi suggests that detachment from self and the world, disappointment and sorrow, purgation of soul and suffering are the unavoidable conditions for the spiritual of man. When a man's delusions are absolutely shattered, and when he realizes the heart – felt agony and the terrible mess of his life, his mind is struck by some inevitable questions about his identity and the purpose and relevance of his life. Man feels a desperate need to be restored to his spiritual moorings

and his authentic self from which he has cut off. He suffers in inner conflict resulting from the contradictory pulls within his self. In the wake of the struggle between his conflicting selves man comes to know about himself and his attachment to the world. He realizes that withdrawing himself from life renunciation all responsibilities is not the proper solution to his problem with the purpose of soul-making he has to perform his duty in this world following the doctrine of Karma.

Arun Joshi's novels are confessional in tone and they exhibit transfer to the inner realms, extreme self-consciousness and individuality from the external reality of his heroes. The self-centred and self-oriented heroes of Arun Joshi are unaware not only of their surroundings an environment but also of their own selves and it is because of their self-satisfying conduct that they feel uncomfortable to face the truth. Arun Joshi's fiction is primarily an account of the soul's quest for integration and its spiritual commitment. Joshi's depiction of the interior recesses of human soul, his preoccupation with the individual self and psychological treatment of grief, suffering, rootlessness and loneliness, and further, his use of the technique of self-introspection have gained him ground as a mature artist.

Arun Joshi has successfully delineated his contemporary philosophical, religious, political and social problems and issues through his characters and narrative technique. His presentation of the tormented and conflicting self of the contemporary man has added new dimensions to the Indian English psychological novel. By mingling social phenomenon and spiritual element, and the physical and the metaphysical aspects, Joshi has presented a vision of life highlighting the ancient Indian cultural values. Despite his small contribution to the Indian English writing, Arun Joshi shines as a bright star in the galaxy of Indian English novelists.

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