

Intents to Intensify Indian Sensibility in the Novels of Arun Joshi

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Abstract

Arun Joshi has added new dimensions to English novel in India. While his predecessors had concentrated on the socio-economic situation, Joshi looked inwards to discover the sources of the problems man suffers from. At the same time, Joshi has unambiguously referred to Indian scriptures and their message as forming an imperative part of the solution man needs to come out of the impasse. The anguish, the dilemma, the quest, and the arrival, in brief, to use his own words, “that mysterious underworld which is the human soul” find a voice in his fiction. His novels are primarily concerned with religious issues—the problems of an essentially Hindu mind.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, Hindu worldview, renunciation, positive approach, authentic life, universal questions of human existence.

In a way vehemently refreshing and innovatively reinterpretation of the paths of Activism and Contemplation, Arun Joshi has mapped new territories of consciousness. The path of renunciation does not abandon activity; rather, it preserves the spirit of renunciation. Activity, to be free, must leave no room for self-seeking impulse. The *Gita* insists on the performance of one's duty with detachment from the concerns of the fruit of the action. This synthesis is given wide and spectacular currency by the contemporary Indian thinkers in their schemes of reconstruction of the Hindu moral ideals, and Arun Joshi has vividly elaborated and enforced these ideals in all his novels. His ethos is, he tells quite categorically and disarmingly, “essentially Hindu” (Mathai 3).

According to Joshi the Indian mind has its own lineaments, its own peculiar (even if these are common to some other minds) habits and approaches to life's problems. The essential Indian emotional response has the following essential features: positive approach towards the world, cosmic and spiritualistic attitude, integral and synthetic view, bringing together of theism and absolutism, new approaches to salvation, vitality, openness and catholicity, and humanistic tendencies. In novel after novel Joshi uses these strands of thought and belief convincingly.

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Joshi’s representations of Indian sensibility and the attempts to map out its various contours prove him as a man whose roots are deeply rooted in the Indian religion, Vedas and Hindu ethos. His fiction draws heavily on the Hindu worldview. He, for sure, offers a positive attitude towards life. The world being both real and spiritual, he does not see any discord between the life on the spiritual plane and one on the physical plane. He rejects skepticism and accepts religion. At the same time, he emphasizes humanistic and western approach but without losing his essential Indian mode. The world, as he views it, is with all its frictions and factions, not a foreign land, and people not alienated, haunted beings.

The range of themes depicted in Joshi’s novels is quite wide and varied, and covers temporal as well as timeless issues. However, the quest for belief is a pronounced and recurrent motif in his fiction. Loss of self is an invariable trauma for the protagonists of all his novels. Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner* and Billy Biswas in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* find themselves caught in the impersonal and superficial societies in both India and America. Being sensitive to their environment, they soon see through the hypocrisy and pretensions of human relationships prevalent in these societies. Every human relationship is casual, objective and functional. Sindi experiences the decay of human emotions in his relationships with Anna and Kathy. Participants at a ball organized by the International Students Association in America only pretend to be courteous. Even the strangers at the time of parting promise to meet again, ‘knowing full well that they do not mean it.’ “That,” says Sindi “was the American way” (Joshi, *The Foreigner*, p.13). Similar is his experience at the social parties at Mr. Khemka’s house. He finds these parties a bit of a hoax, with people drinking, eating and talking of money, a la Prufrock doing nothing worthwhile. Billy forsakes this meaningless existence in the civilized world because he oppressed by the phony environment, he is in. He rejects the artificiality, hollowness, and snobbery of the tinsel world.

Arun Joshi is chiefly concerned with the decaying upper crust of the Indian society. Even when he refers to the poor life, it is depicted from the point of view of the upper class. Joshi, too, finds the validity of the facts lying beyond the phenomenal world. His novels begin with actual experiences. Along with it, he finds a need to discover the reality, which lies hidden in the actuality of his own life. He says:

My novels are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and towards myself.... If I did not write, I imagine, I would use some other medium to carry on my exploration (Dhawan, 1986, p.18).

A study of Joshi's novels reveals that he looks back at the glorious past of India as a solution to all 'man-made' problems. "The world indeed belongs to God and no one else" echoes the revelations that Lord Krishna had for Arjuna in the battle of Mahabharata. In every novel, by and large, Joshi attempts to search for values, angles and formulas that are still lying dormant in the darkest recesses of the minds of Indians. The cosmic and spiritualistic outlook, an integral and synthetic view of life, the path to salvation, the humanistic tendencies and the dynamism of Indian culture all things of the past but are still the solutions in the modern 'waste-land', and are the "Da, Da, Da" that Eliot discovered as the panacea to all our anguish.

Arun Joshi's novels, one can safely argue, are true reflections of the present day Indian society, its cynicism, hedonism, loss of faith, confusion of values, dependence on logic and reason and anxieties. The progress in the field of science and technology has given rise to skepticism where man wants to have evidence for each and everything. Arun Joshi seems to be striving for a faithful depiction of Indian sensibility in his novels which orchestrate a variety of approaches towards a comprehensive and affirmative vision of life in the contemporary India. In one of his rare statements about his own work, he says that his novels are "essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of myself" (Dhawan 18). Apart from other things, his fiction deals with the religious issues – the problems of an essentially Hindu mind, converting the challenge of reality into a vision and a prophecy. Using a west-born medium he writes Indian stories, succeeding in the process, using William Walsh's words "in building an Indian sensibility at home in English art" (250).

The protagonists of Arun Joshi arrive at a realization that there are higher values than the materialistic and, except for Billy Biswas, whose instinctive gravitation for an authentic life in a primitive society leads him to martyrdom, move on from agnosticism or even negation to faith and redemption. Sindi Oberoi becomes, at the end, a sort of *Karmayogi*, endeavouring to reduce the miseries of his fellow-beings. Ratan Rathor evolves from a simple, unsophisticated youth into a ruthless materialist, but an emotional jolt makes him seek redemption through humility, penance and confession. Som Bhaskar embodying a synthesis of sensuality and reason, progresses from agnostic materialism to faith marked by an atmosphere replete with suggestive religious symbols.

In *The City and the River*, Joshi succeeds in creating a minor classic, succeeds in Putting significant focus on the meaning and cyclic nature of life, all of which have their basis in the Hindu plan of universe. Vachaspati Dwivedi rightly maintains that Joshi's "obsessive preoccupation with

man and his situation is his *forte* and he has explored its staggering variety with rare perspicacity and acumen” (143).

Most Indian writers of English limited themselves to an either/or thesis. As thesis writers, they have chosen to narrow their range; they would take sides, and take sides of one way of life or the other. Most of them, starting with M R Anand and continuing on to Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, would write social novels, novels about ills of society, and the problems Indian society suffers from, viz. caste situation, poverty, religious intolerance. On the other hand, they would take a leaf out of the western masters and attempt to investigate the dilemmas the human soul is afflicted with.

Writers like Anita Desai and Arun Joshi are psychological novelists. Joshi, in particular, has managed to fuse the Hindu metaphysics with subtle penetrative psychological analysis, and in addition, seasoned his view of life with broad existentialism, managing in the process to portray characters who are modern westernized intellectuals with roots in Hindu/ Indian soil. Joshi is that special case eclectic in his approach and vision, and not glued to a mummified, moth- eaten view. Open to all shades of opinion, because life *per se* is not to be put into rigid pipelines but is a kaleidoscope of different colours, oriental here and occidental there, Hindu here and existential there. In all his novels, starting with *The Foreigner* and culminating in *The City and the River*, Joshi has dug deep into the inner world of his characters and brought out the multidimensionality of life. Arun Joshi has a sensitive, unique and optimistic view of the past. A closer look at this characteristic of his novels brings the multidimensional perspectives of Joshi’s characters who, on the surface level, remain knotted in the ‘labyrinth’ of being and meaning of life and yet go back to the Indian past and its sensibility to seek answers to the afflicting questions whose answers are hard to come by. In addition to Indian scriptures and valuable preaching they give, Joshi finds answers to these unflinching queries in the teachings of Buddha that have been an integral part of Indian ethos. While going back to Indian culture, Joshi has remained aware of India’s historical past and its advantages to find peace and meaning only after embracing it.

As one of the few front-ranking fictionists, Joshi is an original talent exploring deeper into the moral and spiritual crisis of the contemporary India. He began his odyssey into the dark, mysterious, and uncharted hinterland of the soul to examine some perennial tribulations of human existence. His novels deal with social alienation (including self-alienation) and the concomitant restlessness and search for a way out of the intricate maze of contemporary life. In doing so, he explores in the Indian context some universal questions of human existence. He gives a proper shape and form in fiction to the chaos and confusion in the mind of contemporary man. His coalescing of self-introspection with self-mockery adds a new dimension to the art of Indian English fiction.

The forgoing analysis of Arun Joshi's novels demonstrates that he has been preoccupied with the problems of twentieth century's dilemma and its repercussions. In an age when religious faith is fast disappearing and man feels culturally uprooted and socially alienated on account of his own (mis)doings, the message of serious artists like Joshi is most welcome and called for. Tapan Kumar Ghosh says:

Joshi may be regarded as avante garde novelist in the sense that for the first time in the history of Indian novel in English he has forcefully exploited and given sustained treatment to a very potent theme of his times, namely a maladjusted individual pitted against an insane, lopsided society which is unhinged from its cultural as well as spiritual moorings, and his uncompromising quest for identity (30).

With a glorious past as the guiding beacon Arun Joshi strives to forge a new future for the masses, be it for the Indians or for people elsewhere. The task is difficult, he knows it, but not impossible. It is, according to Joshi, only the 'Indian way' that will rebuild the world these problems. We must evolve gradually from a negative philosophy of detachment to its positive aspect, which, as *Gita* says, is that real detachment from men and matters which comes when one performs one's duty sincerely without any desire for the result or 'fruit'.

The non-attached man puts an end to pain; not only in himself, but also to such pain as he may inflict on others. Similarly, the longing for natural approach of existence is no mere fantasy or sentimental impulse; it is in consonance with fundamental human needs, the fulfilment of which (although in different form) is the pre-condition of our survival. In this state one can remain pure, sensitive, and mystically linked with Nature, its authentic humanity and its inherent spontaneity. The "move to nature" is also the call and answer of Arun Joshi to all our problems. Nature is our preacher and teacher as has been asserted by innumerable writers and poets, and the solution to all our miseries lies with it.

For this reason, Joshi maintains that it is in Hinduism that one gets lessons in "right way to live" (Banerjee, 1983, p.3) Hinduism provides the solution to man's problems because of its insistence that man is a spark of divine will. S. Radhakrishnan's words in this regard show beyond doubt how God enters life. It is not in going to temples etc. that man can see and feel God, nor can "the reality of God be . . . proved by logic. It can only be realized by faith and meditation" (1923, p.511).

The quest for belief, in the novels of Arun Joshi, takes different routes and comes from varied sources. All his novels have this in common that they start new voyages in different shapes

and locations, and yet keep an identity that is unmistakably Arun Joshi. This dissertation seeks to analyze all the novels of Joshi in the light of these preoccupations on the part of Joshi.

In his use of language, Joshi walks his way, regardless of what others in the genre were doing. Consequently, he does not give the distortions of language *a la* Mulk Raj Anand, coarsen it the way Khushwant Singh does, and indulge in B. Rajan type scholarship. Joshi is Indian without being overly Indian. He is, Banerjee rightly observes, not “hung up about [his] Indo-Anglian Status” (7). Eclectic that he is in his mind, he uses an idiom which is Indian not snapping quintessential “Englishness” that a novel in English must needs follow. His use of Indian/Hindi words never jars; it never appears forced and affected. For an illustration, consider the following:

Still later, the girl was dancing, a mere child, thin and wispy in her costume of a kathak dancer. Her little feet, so like a pair of pink birds, played with the smooth floor. The ghunghrus mingled with the wail of the sarangii [originally not italicized], kept beat with the tablas. Her eyes, the neck, the full mouth and the little hands, gesticulated, suggested, built up, gesture by gesture, beat by beat, a little sensuous fire... (The Last Labyrinth, 55).

The mixing of Hindi words with English, the use of a bilingual idiom captures the bicultural identity of characters. An Indian using English cannot avoid inserting vernacular words, more so when there are no equivalents in English. For example, *mehandi* is not vermilion, nor is *tabla* drum. (For that reason, there are words and expressions in English that have no Hindi cognants, like uncle, cousin, parent, and words in Hindi that have no English parallels, like *dada*, *dadi*, *chappal*, *paani jhutha hai*). It would not do to use translation; indeed, translation very often kills the spirit of mother expression; what will do is an effortless code-switching and codemixing.

Joshi’s adoption of native words attempts precisely this. He fully encapsulates the Indian experience without losing in any way the idiom of English. The multiculturalism and the plurality of the situations in his novels are fully encased in the linguistic variety in which they are expressed. So, we have phrases like half-assed rigmarole, mumbo-jumbo, flunked and flushed off sharing space with *yajna*, *inquilab*, *shamiana*, *haqiqat*, *arti* and *raat ki rani*.

Begum Akhtar gazals come on the same wavelength as American Jazz, and Pascal and Descartes rub shoulders with Lord Krishna, a vedic hermit, and a Kathak dancer, though each speaks in his own natural idiom. Arun Joshi’s language, in short, is that of a city bred educated person sensitive to his environment but one who does not play with the basic edifice of his medium, the Standard English. His Indian heritage does not damage his English education just as his English education does not impair his native structure.

In the very first review to appear of *The City and the River*, G.S. Amur had wondered admiring Joshi's *oeuvre*: "Where can he go from here?" (157). No one could have known then that Joshi would die only two years later. But the question has got fully answered. Arun Joshi has reached a place no living English language writer in India can dream of reaching. His achievements in the genre are such as have paled his contemporaries and have also put him among the masters in the game.

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