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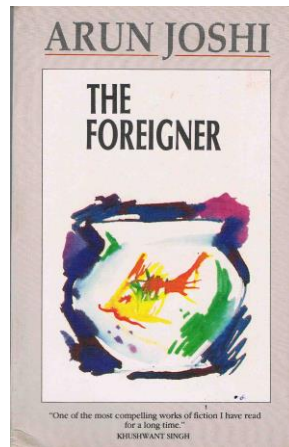
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**Theme of Withdrawal in Arun Joshi's Novel *The Foreigner***

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**Abstract**

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**Dr. Vathana Fenn (Ed.) *Grammar and Grammar Teaching: Changing Perspectives***

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Theme of Withdrawal in Arun Joshi's Novel *The Foreigner*

This paper deals with Arun Joshi's recurrent theme of withdrawal in his novel *The Foreigner*. His hero is an intensely self-centred person, prone to escapism. Joshi deals with the theme of withdrawal in relation to self, the society around, and the society outside and also humanity at large. Joshi tries to excavate the lonely life led by the protagonist. This novel examines the problem of a man's frustration at being unable to find a meaning in his existence and also how he departs from his responsibilities and tasks.

### **The Theme of Withdrawal**

Arun Joshi is a prolific writer writing in English. He grapples with the moments of terribly trying situations in human life. His novels explore the human predicament and the motives responsible for a man's action, or his psyche. He reveals the confrontation of man with his self and the question of his existence. His search is directed to the mysterious region of the human psyche, and it delves deeper and deeper into the inner recesses to find instincts and impulse at work.

This paper deals with the theme of withdrawal in Arun Joshi's first novel *The Foreigner*. Through the hero, Joshi makes his readers peek into the confused inner self of the man who is spiritually bankrupt and withdraws from all his works, while dealing with various people throughout his life.

### **The Protagonist Sindi Oberoi**

The protagonist is a young man called Sindi Oberoi. He lacks involvement in the life he leads. The following paragraphs explain his feelings of separation from his family life, love life, social life, friendship, and studies.

*The Foreigner* opens in a morgue where Sindi Oberoi has to identify his dead friend, Babu Rao Khemka. Of mixed parentage (mother English, father Kenyan – Indian), Sindi is haunted by rootlessness and a confused sense of life. He has no strong bonds. He

calls himself an alien. He is an Indian Kenyan who returns to India after many years in the west.

### **Relationship to Parents**

Joshi's Sindi Oberoi, is a product of the meeting of the East and the West. After the death of his parents, Sindi is deprived of parental love. On the other hand, he does not care for their images and shows utter indifference when he is reminded of them. He tells Khemka, "For the hundredth time I related the story of the strangers; whose only reality was a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs" (11). Sindi recalls those days when his parents lost their lives in an air crash, while he needed them most. He is forced to lead a life of a foreigner, after the death of his uncle but during his uncle's presence he felt a kind of security with him. He finds himself insecure and uncomfortable:

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).

### **Alien to His Own Culture**

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 a security and his sense of being an outsider remains static. His restlessness, mental agonies that he suffers and his own predicament with existence, compel him to think this way:

But you at least know what made an ass of a man; we do not even know that you had a clear cut system of morality, a caste system that laid down all you had to do. You had a God. You had roots in the soil you lived upon, look at me. I have no roots. I have no system of morality. What does

it mean to me if you call me an immoral man? I have no reason to be one thing rather than another. You ask me why I am not ambitious; well, I have no reason to become so, to think of it. I do not even have reason to live. (135 – 36).

### **Illusions**

Sindi's nourishing illusions and pretending detachment makes him form relations with a series of women; but with June, he has come face to face with his hypocrisy and stupidity. The inner conflict makes him refuse to the proposal of marriage with June. Sindi feels that, "Detachment consists of right action and not escape from it" (*The Foreigner*, 206). His sense of alienation worsens after the death of June and also Babu.

### **Complete Withdrawal from Life's Pursuits**

Sindi may have had some mission, some purpose, and some desire in life, but he has completely withdrawn himself from all such pursuits of life. Since he has never been guided in his earlier life to lead such a life, he does not make himself involved with all sorts of natural ventures. Without such guidance either from his parents or his uncle one knows well that this has been the natural life for him. He has formed his own ideas regarding life. Sindi is more on the defensive and is of the withdrawn self. Sindi wants to escape suffering and as such he tries his best but fails. Sindi is internally hurt and he records the pain of such internal wounds:

There were things I wanted, only I did not know how to get them. I wanted the courage to live without desire and attachment. I wanted peace and perhaps a capacity to live. I wanted all these. But above all, I wanted to conquer pain. What could I have done with the dictatorship of a company if the ball of pain still hung around my neck like a dead albatross? I wanted an answer to the question that my suffering had left with me like swollen carcasses strewn on riverbanks after a flood; only after I knew what my purpose was, could I begin to fulfill it. (118)

### **Undergoes Changes, Yet Still an Alien**

Sindi Oberoi remains an alien throughout his life. He undergoes various changes and a number of bitter experiences. While he was in Kenya, he contemplates suicide and when he comes to London, his dull life gets a little lift in his love life with Anne and Kathy. These experiences disturb him badly. He knows the intimate relationship with June and Babu in Boston. Life takes a new turn when he opts for June. June, on the other hand, wants to love, marry and create a home for herself. Sindi's defense of detachment dies down when he learns of her intention. When Sindi overcomes this crisis and finishes his studies, he decides to come over to India with the notion that his main purpose is to look after the family of Babu, as an act of penance and to atone for his involvement in the death of Babu.

### **Alien in Home Land**

Sindi finds himself as good as a foreigner in India as he was in America. He realizes his position of "an uprooted young man living in the latter half of the 20th century" (195). His deep-rooted sense of a foreigner does not leave him even for a moment:

Perhaps I feel like that because I was a foreigner in America. But what difference it would have made if I had lived Kenya or India or any other place for that matter? It seems to me that I would still be a foreigner, my foreignness lay within me and I could not live myself behind whatever I want. (61)

Sindi tries to shirk off his duties, not out of the experiences of life, but out of his lack of life's immense knowledge. His advice to June breaks his emotional hold on her and proves to be a self-deception, when he says:

Marriage would not help, June. We are alone both you and I that is the problem. And our aloneness must be resolved from within. You cannot send two persons through a ceremony and expect that their aloneness will disappear. (126)

### **Self-analysis**

The protagonist tries to defend his standpoint with regard to involvement. At times he undergoes self-analysis. He realizes his position as an outsider. He blames the American culture for the eventual disturbance in his life, the disorder he undergoes, the obsession he faces. 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).

### **Meaningless Human Life**

Sindi is morally responsible for the death of both June and Babu. He harbours a deep-rooted feeling of unreality and in course of time, he feels as an insecure man. His relationship with Anna, Kathy and June fails, as he cannot work out a complete union in any case. His disassociated view of life and the world and his peculiar relationship with others, work very greatly to test his isolated nature. He is fully aware of the meaninglessness of human life in this world. He believes in the inevitable suffering and endless struggle between good and bad. He admits, “There is no end to suffering, no end to struggle between good and evil” (41). To Sindi, life is short-lived, unreal and inescapably painful. He observes:

Nothing ever seems real to me, leave alone permanent. Nothing seems to be very important ... Death wipes out everything, for most of us anyway. All that is left is a big mocking zero ... But in my world there are no statues of liberty. In my world things are inevitable and what's more, all of them are sad and painful (107-8).

### **Continuing Sense of Seclusion**

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Sindi's sense of seclusion is his only motive in life. He will remind himself very often, "I don't want to get involved" (62). A sense of separation has engulfed Sindi after the death of his uncle in Kenya who was his last link in life. He could not nurture a bright side of life. He is open to let out his thoughts:

I could see the lengthened shadows in unlighted rooms... I could smell the decay of love, the sudden realization that the end had begun... the hand that so livingly held mine would perhaps someday ache to hit me. I wasn't afraid of getting hurt, but to hurt June would have been unbearable. I could avoid the tears and the lengthening shadows if only I had the strength to act on what was right. (63)

### **Failure to Grasp the Essentials of Life**

Sindi's efforts did not bring him any positive response in life because there were no experiences which taught him the art of living. Thus he fails to grasp the essentials of life. He admits his longing for experience "I didn't work to earn money. My mind was full of thoughts and I wanted a different kind of experience to sort out my ideas" (142). All that appears to him as pleasant and delightful at first, ends in pain and it puzzles him. His love affairs with Anna, Kathy and June do not provide eternal, permanent and perfect happiness.

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 both June and Babu drain out his lingering confidence. A deep sense of internal pain in him makes him feel 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 a strong urge overtakes him again to wander about the streets of the world. The sense of withdrawal heightens his longing for isolation.

## **Refuse to Mingle**

Sindi is once again faced with the problem of putting together all that has happened to him and his coming to grips with life. He becomes a petty officer in a firm belonging to a corrupt industrialist, Khemka. There 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 is caught in the nets of events and he cannot withdraw.

Sindi's main characteristic is that, he would not mingle with others easily, he is aloof. It is this withdrawal from action that lands him in a complicated situation. He has to decide in any serious action; but he will sense the danger of a future course of action and desists from carrying it on. Naturally he will withdraw himself from the action or the persons connected with the action. He explains his point of view in the following lines:

There is no purpose in life. There is perhaps a little purpose in right action, in action without desire. I had little desire to become a saint. I merely wanted to escape pain I had found many ways but I had found none. (120)

## **Motives Revealed**

Arun Joshi brings out the motives of Sindi here and there. Being like the protagonist of the novel, only the novelist could talk of the helplessness of a 'foreigner' as Sindi, who is without roots, no family and relations. Through Sindi, he finds the right character to pour out the feelings of an aggrieved soul:

There were things I wanted; only I didn't know how to get them. I wanted the courage to live as I wanted; the courage to live without desire and attachment. I wanted peace and perhaps a capacity to love. I wanted all these. But above all, I wanted to conquer pain. What could I have done with the dictatorship of a company if the ball of pain still hung around my neck like a dead albatross? (120)



Joshi seems to draw an X-ray of the protagonist's mind. Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist realizes that his mind is struck by some inevitable questions about his identity, and the purpose and relevance of his life. He thus realizes that withdrawing himself from life, renouncing all responsibilities is not the proper solution to his problem of soul-searching, if he has to do his duty in this world. Thus this hero seems uncomfortable to face the truth and this is what makes him withdraw from all his actions in his life. Thus he has to distance himself from society to avoid pain, concern and its aftermath.

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