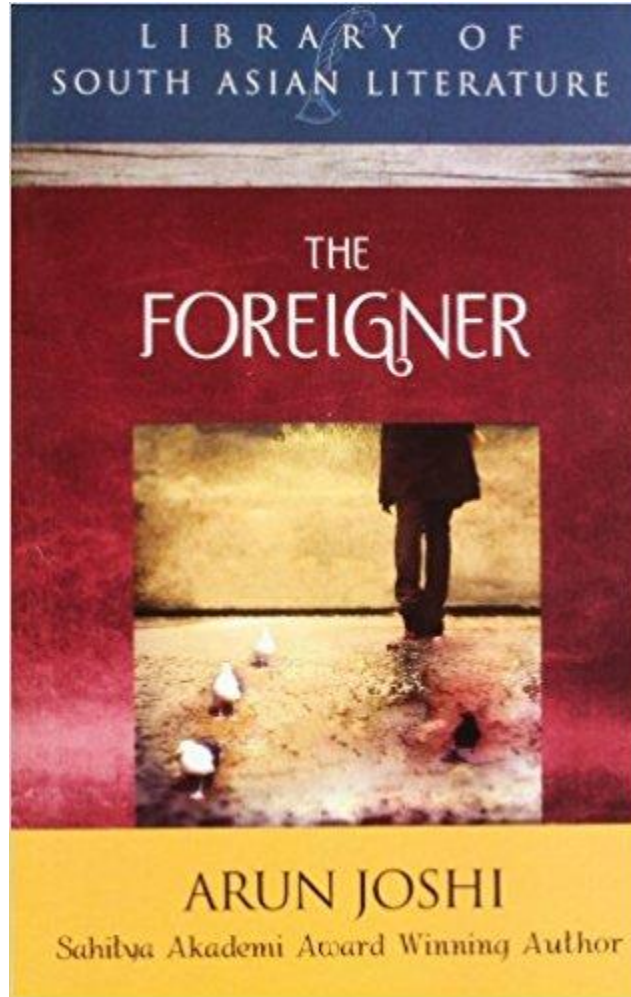


Emotional Estrangement in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*

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Abstract

Arun Joshi, in his maiden novel, *The Foreigner*, highlights modern man's anxiety, identity crisis, alienation, rootlessness, existential quest, meaninglessness of life, and dilemmas that emanate from his cultural, social, and emotional estrangement. The protagonist of the novel, Sindi Oberoi, an Indian immigrant, is continually in a quest for some purpose and meaning in his life. His "hybrid identity," owing to his mixed parentage, makes him feel rootless, detached, and emotionally estranged wherever he goes. He remains a "foreigner" to the world and perceives himself as a stranger. This paper attempts to focus on how Sindi Oberoi's notions of non-

involvement and detachment land him in a state of emotional estrangement. Through the protagonist, the novelist drives home the message to the modern man that detachment “consisted of right action and not escape from it” (204).

Key words: Arun Joshi, *The Foreigner*, hybrid identity, identity crisis, emotional estrangement, detachment.

The Foreigner

Arun Joshi, in his novel, *The Foreigner*, depicts the pitiable predicament of the protagonist Sindi Oberoi, who is constantly in a quest to seek some kind of remedy for his sense of estrangement and identity crisis. The author has successfully presented the isolation of modern man, who becomes an alienated soul not only amidst his fellow beings but an outsider to himself too. Globalization has indeed opened avenues for modern man to exhibit his talents and thereby has paved way to materialize his dreams. Hordes of people for want of better job opportunities, monetary benefits, higher studies, and to realize their dreams, dislocate from their homeland and relocate themselves in the host land. However, in the process of survival, they are often entrapped between the traditional inherited culture and the new, unfamiliar, antagonistic host culture. Modern man’s incapability to attune himself with the new existing social, psychological, cultural, linguistic, and spiritual situations, has forced him to shed off the positive human traits like love, brotherhood, hope, compassion, spirituality etc... It is indeed true that globalization has shrunk the whole world into a “Global village” with its technological advancements, nevertheless, it has left man bereft of his values and thus, modern man remains alienated, homeless, frustrated, culturally alienated, socially isolated and emotionally estranged.

Alienation

Alienation, “a very common theme in Indo-English novel” as Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly points out, forms the dominant theme in *The Foreigner* too. Generally, diasporic writers give expression to their diasporic experiences – bitter or pleasant, in their literary creations. Arun Joshi, who has garnered rich experiences during his stay in the US as a student, is successful in giving expression to his diasporic sensibility. His migrant characters, like their creator, become “the confused wanderers between two worlds” (29) as K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar terms them. They straddle cultures and become a victim to rootlessness. The feeling of rootlessness drives modern man to the state of self-alienation. The inability to acclimatize oneself with the existing situation creates inner crisis in modern man and thus lands him in self-estrangement.

Human Dilemmas

Arun Joshi, one of the most renowned thought-provoking novelists, in *The Foreigner*, addresses issues related to human dilemmas. In an interview with Purabi Banerjee, the novelist admits the fact that he himself has led the life of an alienated man: “It is largely autobiographical. I am... somewhat alienated man myself... some parts of *The Foreigner*, my first book, was written when I was a student in America. I gave it up then and completed it later in 1966” (4). The author also states that the protagonists in the novel appear to be his mouthpiece conveying the twinge of self-estrangement that their creator has experienced. In this regard, R. S. Pathak in “The Alienated Protagonist in the Indo-English Novel,” observes the different manifestations of alienation:

Alienation is one of the greatest problems confronting modern man. Its corrosive impact can be seen in the form of generation gap, the anti-war movement, the hippie phenomenon, the credibility gap, the compartmentalization of our lives, the stunting of personal development, the conspicuous absence of a sense of meaningfulness of life, and so on. (68)

Sindi Oberoi

The story of *The Foreigner* revolves around the psycho-somatic evolution of such an emotionally estranged modern man, Sindi Oberoi, who leads a detached life wherever he goes. Hence Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly claims that “*The Foreigner* is the first Indo-Anglican novel to deal with a genuine human predicament without compromise and without clichés” (4). The novel is narrated in a series of flashbacks highlighting the blossoming of human relationships in the beginning of the novel and the withering of such relationships in the end. Sindi Oberoi, who is of mixed parentage – English mother and Kenyan-Indian father, is born in Kenya, gets educated in England and in America, and finally settles in India. Having lost his parents in his infancy in an air crash, he could hardly recollect his memories about his parents and his childhood from “a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs” (12). Fated to be a foreigner from birth, he does not have any emotional support to cling to. He could not trace his roots and feels himself incomplete and rootless. Hence he confesses his pitiable state to grow as an orphan having no family ties, no country to be called as his “home” and thus suffers from identity crisis: “My foreignness lay within me” (55). Homelessness, loss of cultural identity, and personal history make his life a purposeless existence:

Somebody has begotten me without a purpose and so far I had lived without a purpose... I hadn't felt that when my uncle was living... 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. Now I suppose I existed only for dying. (FOR 55-56)

Unable to adapt himself to the alien socio-cultural matrix, he is conscious of the “foreignness” of his spirit and thus eventually becomes “a perennial outsider” as Meenakshi Mukherjee aptly points out. He “goes round in circle in a whirl, going everywhere and getting nowhere” (128). Persistently obsessed by the impermanence of things and human relationships, he withdraws himself from the society and asserts: “I have no roots” (42) and “rootless, restless and luckless in a mad, bad and absurd world” (152). Thus he remains “an alien everywhere physically as well as metaphorically” (202) who often suspected that he “was going mad” (137).

Having garnered immigrant experiences from London, Boston, and India, Sindi Oberoi undergoes a series of transformations. Yet, his detachment and sense of foreignness, the by-products of spatial dislocation, compel him to contemplate on suicide. He himself admits that he “was tired of living” (174) and “existed only for dying” (65). In London, when Anna, a minor artist of “thirty-five with dark hair and finely chiselled features” (176), reveals her liking for Sindi Oberoi, he fails to reciprocate Anna’s love. Instead, he reveals his love for Kathy, who deliberately rejects him. Such broken relationships trouble him intensely and make him believe in the impermanence of human relationships and fickleness of human emotions, and thus add on to his sense of detachment. His discussions on religion and mysticism with the Catholic priest

reveal his perceptions on the absurdity of love, relationship, and existence: “All love – whether of things, persons or oneself was illusion and all pain sprang from this illusion. Love begot greed and attachment and it led to possession” (180). Hence, when he arrives to America, he remains determined not to entangle himself in any kind of relationship and hence refuses to establish any kind of relationship with June Blyth, who approaches him with genuine love: “One should be able to love without wanting to possess ... One should be able to detach oneself from the object of one’s love” (60). Though he continues his affair with June Blyth for a long time, he does not want to marry her when she requests him, “Let’s get married, Sindi. For God’s sake, let’s get married” (107). To her, he reveals his philosophy about love and significance of detachment in love:

Absence of love does not mean hatred. Hatred is just another form of love. 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 which 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. (FOR 145)

Sense of Insecurity

Probably, Sindi Oberoi’s sense of insecurity, his notions about the transitory nature of relationships prevent him from establishing emotional bonds with people. He reveals his detached attitude towards life to June Blyth:

I have loved people as much as I love myself. It isn’t much but that is not my fault. And then to be in love in your sense requires one to take things seriously, assume that there is a permanence about things. Nothing ever seems real to me, leave alone permanent. Nothing seems to be very important. (FOR 92)

June Blyth

When Sindi Oberoi meets June Blyth in Boston, she seems inquisitive to know more about him and hence raises many questions about him. Feeling embarrassed, he switches over to another topic for discussion. June Blyth could notice Sindi Oberoi reacting eccentrically to the questions asked. Observing him keenly, June Blyth identifies the “foreignness of spirit” in him: “There is something strange about you, you know some-thing distant. I’d guess that when people are with you, they don’t feel like they’re human beings. May be, it’s an Indian characteristic, but I have a feeling you’d be *foreigner* anywhere” (33).

An Ostracised Man

Sindi Oberoi is portrayed as an ostracised man who eschews himself from the society. Factors like the unexpected death of his parents, his uncle, who was his guardian, and the demise of his friend, Baburao Khemka, the son of a wealthy Indian industrialist, lead to his ostracism. Probably, he is petrified about the notion that attachment and involvement may consequently lead to loss in one form or another. He regards life meaningless and deems that “death wipes out everything for most of us anyway. All that is left is a big mocking zero” (114). He believes that life is illusory and inescapably excruciating.

Straddling Cultures

Straddling cultures also contributes to Sindi Oberoi's feeling of purposelessness. His mixed parentage lands him in a dilemma of which culture to follow. The variations in the codes of morality from country to country land him in a chaotic state. The writer aptly contrasts Indian culture with American culture regarding the notions of marriage, chastity, and genuine love:

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 don't even have a reason to live. (FOR 144)

Baburao Khemka – Forgetting Roots

Arun Joshi presents Baburao Khemka as a young man who forgets his roots and is fascinated by the sophisticated American life. However, his Indian psyche conditioned by Oriental fixations does not allow him to accept the fact that his lover, June Blyth once loved his friend, Sindi Oberoi. When June Blyth pleads Babu to marry her, Babu is reminded of his stringent father's attitude towards love and marriage: "He sent me here and I promised him I'll never marry in America" (100). Though Babu is fascinated by American culture, he does not completely disown his inherited Indian values. His orthodox family background and inherited cultural values curb him from marrying June Blyth. When June Blyth conveys Babu the news that she is carrying his child, he becomes suspicious about her earlier affair with Sindi Oberoi, gets tensed, and lamentably meets with a car accident. When Sindi Oberoi comes to know about Babu's demise and June Blyth's death while undergoing abortion, he realizes the misleading notion of detachment: "Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it. The gods had set a heavy price to teach me just that" (193). Such heart-breaking episodes in Sindi Oberoi's life compel him to undergo a series of transformations. After Babu's death, Sindi Oberoi visits India to explain the cause of Babu's death to Khemka and Babu's sister, Shiela, in Delhi.

Meanwhile, when Khemka invites him to work in his firm as his personal assistant, he readily accepts the offer. Nevertheless, the situation that prevails in the factory and the materialistic nature of the people disgust him. However, Muthu, a low-paid labourer in the firm, makes him understand that the true meaning of detachment lies in getting involved with the world: "Sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved" (239). Sindi Oberoi understands the distinction between detachment and involvement. This message revitalizes him and helps him to emerge from his identity crisis. Finally, he decides to take charge of Khemka's business, as Khemka gets arrested for his fraudulent business ethics. With involvement and attachment, he decides to devote his life for the betterment of the factory workers.

Truth about Migrants

Thus, Arun Joshi has successfully depicted the truth that migrants struggle hard to shed off their Oriental roots and to acclimatize themselves to the Occidental influences. *The Foreigner* is a remarkable novel that bristles throughout with ruminations on various issues encountered by modern man. The novelist beautifully delineates the pitiable plight of the emotionally estranged Sindi Oberoi, who, due to his philosophy of detachment and non-involvement becomes a foreigner to the world and sees himself as a stranger. His "foreignness of spirit" makes him suffer from the maladies of modern man – cultural, social, and emotional estrangement. At the

end of the novel, Arun Joshi brilliantly conveys the message that detachment lies not in withdrawal but in involvement.

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