

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 10 October 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

Surrinder to Surrender: An insight into Joshi's *The Foreigner*

Bala S. Devi, Ph.D.

Understanding Ethical Codes

Arun Joshi, a veteran philosopher himself, excels in exploring various modes of philosophies that he comes to know of, during his sojourn in Western countries and his career in India within his short span of productive life on this planet. The outpouring of his misled protagonist Surrinder Oberoi in his understanding of ethical codes are simply fantastic, though affected ones from a young man who has grown old before his time, being weary with his loneliness, as shown in the following quotations: "Foreignness lay within oneself and one cannot leave one's past behind him without reaping what he sows. Marriage more often is a lust for possession than anything else...where the couple

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 10 October 2011

Bala S. Devi, Ph.D.

Surrinder to Surrender: An insight into Joshi's *The Foreigner*

gobbled up each other up” (Foreigner 66). And “Love is real when you know what you love must one day die” (Foreigner 170). Muthu, the simplest character in the novel is recognized as a powerful philosopher who is the kingpin in tuning Surrinder Oberoi to Surrender Oberoi.

None Can Avoid Work Entirely

It is impossible for any man to abandon work in its entirety. It is not at all proper to renounce work that ought to be done as duty. Detachment falsely taken as non-involvement fearing pain, suffering and loss is wrong. A man owes much to the society into which he is born for having accommodated him. Evasiveness or escapism, as of Sindi never suits an honest person. Abandonment of all desire-prompted action is true renunciation. Muthu says to Sindi persuading the latter to take up the dwindling business of Khemka saying, “sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved” (Foreigner 225), in order to save the poor employees from damnation. J. Krishnamurthi states to people like Sindi that, “you are frightened to lose and you are frightened of something much greater which is to come...you think about it and by thinking about it you are creating that interval between living and that which you call death”(98).

Vedanta Sayings

The Juke box song, “Who knows where / The road will lead? / Only a fool can say.” (Foreigner 193) reminds us of Vedanta, of the unpredictable random happenings in the realm of the Eternal. One should only be a witness to the happening; no active participation in it is demanded by Lord Krishna from Arjuna and every one of us, says The Bhagwad Gita. Instead of living in a having mode, one is expected to adhere to a being mode in order to avert the fruits of Karma besides being alert not to lean towards

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 10 October 2011

Bala S. Devi, Ph.D.

Surrinder to Surrender: An insight into Joshi’s *The Foreigner*

inaction. Sindi learns this supreme lesson, thus having become a Karmayogi reaching equanimity and salvation.

Sorrow and Turmoil – Our Teachers

The Hindu scriptures acknowledge experience of sorrow and turmoil one undergoes as the greatest teacher. Sindi feels sad and unhappy over his brilliant academic career that teaches him not an iota of the realities of life. Only his failure has initiated true understanding of life. “Where Kathy and Anna had taught me to be detached from others, June’s death finally broke my attachment to myself” (Foreigner 164) and “Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it” (Foreigner 162).

Ancient Rishis stress that this planet is like a school, a learning place and here we suffer and grow which is also mentioned by the famous psycho-analyst Jesse Stearn in his Matter of Immortality. Sindi gets himself smugly accommodated with the fact that one does not choose one’s involvement and that the event of life that are uncontrollable by human endeavour are of therapeutic effect. The contemplative Sindi, in spite of becoming complacent is not resigned to ignore the effect of one’s desire-bound involvement that adds up to his karma. He is sure that none can escape karma, which has to be answered by every mortal. He confesses to Khemka that in the past “I have sinned, and god knows, I have paid heavily for them ... But you can’t get rid of your sins by just turning me out. They will stalk you from every street corner ... We think we leave our actions behind, but the past is never dead” (Foreigner 229) and “it had only been a change of theatre ... the show had remained unchanged” (Foreigner 174).

An Interpretation of Karma

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 10 October 2011

Bala S. Devi, Ph.D.

Surrinder to Surrender: An insight into Joshi’s *The Foreigner*

A few glimpses into The Bhagwad Gita regarding Karma would be informative. Actions done with attachment and volition causes Karma or bondage. Such people suffer the fruits of their action according to the karmic ledger, the repercussion might be unpleasant, pleasant or none of these. All of a sudden Sindi Oberoi rechristens himself as Surrender Oberoi, fixed in Yoga which is skill in action but still in mind. The self-delusion of Sindi that perverts all ethical codes of Maya, Karma and detachment to suit his own pensive contemplation stating, “Nothing seems real to me, leave alone permanent. Nothing seems to be very important” (Foreigner 113), fades away leading Sindi to an affirmation that in many ways the past had been a waste, but it had not been without lessons as our ancient scripture espouses. Even, “The dead teach you how to overcome their death” (Foreigner 164).

An Autobiographical Novel?

Joshi’s maiden novel The Foreigner could be a narration of an individual person is highly autobiographical. A Japanese biochemist says that when he smiles it is, “A little cheerful, a little sad, and very sexy” (Foreigner 128) which has a lot to reveal. The Foreigner is narrated in a series of flashbacks, with an intense ordering of past events being obviously spiritual and autobiographical. The narrator ‘I’ is both experiencing the foreignness and perceiving others’ foreignness and hence results sometimes in a narrative distance. The novel begins in the manner of a crime thriller, the climactic moment being introduced first. Sindi identifies in a morgue the dead body of Babu Khemka, who dies in a car-wreck and hence rips the veils of feigned detachment. Thereafter, the story swings back and forth between Boston and Delhi.

Reality of Death Running through the Novel

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 10 October 2011

Bala S. Devi, Ph.D.

Surrender to Surrender: An insight into Joshi’s *The Foreigner*

The simple style is enriched and made effective by means of dreams, sickness, wounds, pain and fear. Death in reality, or the very thought or reference to it could be traced throughout the novel resulting in the dynamic turn of events. He avers that, “once you are born, you spend the rest of your life getting away from your birth” (*Foreigner* 124). Even the idea of love and hatred are blended with death and fear. “Love is real only when you know what you love must, one day die” (*Foreigner* 145). J. Krishnamurti says that, “As long as there is fear there is no love ... only when there is no pleasure, no desire or fear, then there is something called love” (77).

The images of wounds, scars and other physical sufferings like abortion, surgery and diseases serve to emphasize the mental agony of the protagonist. June’s separation is like “an unforeseen abortion” (*Foreigner* 123) and her death, is “as if some indefatigable surgeon was cleaning up my soul with the sharp edge of his scalpel” (*Foreigner* 165). The tubercular wife of Muthu living in a single room apartment with eleven others leads to the desired metamorphosis of Sindi.

Seasons to Explore Human Emotions

Joshi makes use of seasons and time to reflect human emotions. At times the seasons forebode certain things. The first time when Sindi meets Babu, it is an “unusually cold” September evening, which is how ultimately Babu’s life ends, in a freezing manner. Constant reference to masks can be detected in this novel. Sindi’s concept of detachment is itself a mask. Sindi acknowledges that “we all have our masks” (30). When Mr. Ghose argues about handing over the office to the proletariat, Sindi says, “The charlatans you wish to destroy will just turn around and put on another mask” (*Foreigner* 38). The death of Babu and June succeed in puncturing his mask and Muthu rips it off. This mask is a

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 10 October 2011

Bala S. Devi, Ph.D.

Surrender to Surrender: An insight into Joshi’s *The Foreigner*

metaphoric one as Fowler defines it as belonging “to the group of concepts which imply that artists discover a more fully integrated vision than that exists in ‘reality’. It implies, too, a way out of the closed world of the ego into an objective vision communicable to others” (177).

Flashbacks Add to the Significance of Story

A series of flashbacks with mellifluous order of arrangement of past events capturing the past and the present, the imaginative world, and the factual happenings maximize the thrill of the novel. The death of Babu in a car accident, the reason that induced Babu’s suicidal rash driving being eclipsed till the reader finishes two thirds of the novel, June’s picture found in Babu’s wallet, the identification of Babu’s mortal remains at the morgue by Sindi Oberoi, letters of Babu written to his sister who well before the accident, has got an idea of Babu’s discomfort at the foreign land, all brings aloft Arun Joshi on par with a thriller writer. The weight of the serious theme of The Foreigner is counteracted by the detective story mode of narration. The chronology of the incidents is not lost in spite of the riddle some way from past and the present.

The “I” Character

The ‘I’ character serves its purpose well, bringing out the protagonist’s psychical contact with society and environment that induce a disturbed psychological development which finally enable him to solve his turmoil of alienation. The very confession of Sindi, that he is not good at remembering events pay testimony to his simplicity of character and confessional mode. As far as possible, the narration of Joshi is neutral, unprejudiced, matter of fact revealing the identities of all the characters true to their nature, rendering

the story on aroma of a real happening experienced by every one of the readers in his vicinity.

Language and Style

The language employed by Joshi, is free flowing. Sprinkling the novel with similes, satire, metaphors, parallelism and oxymorons to indicate variation of mood and intensity of emotional outbursts, Joshi states that Sindi “feels like a river that hopes to leave its dead wood behind taking an unexpected plunge over a steep precipice” (Foreigner 176) since he felt like “sitting in your own tomb”(Foreigner 22). Also “Strangers parted on the doorstep promising to meet again, knowing full well they didn’t mean it . It was the American way” (Foreigner 23). When Sindi’s professor says that every foreign student is an ambassador of his country he wonders “what country had I represented” (Foreigner 43).

Babu’s memory piercing through the statues and Jukebox song to stress Existential appeal are some of the motifs mentioned in the novel. The very title gains a symbolic value in the larger context of human existence and struggle. The metaphysical anguish of the protagonist at the meaninglessness of the human condition, the unreality, insecurity and transitoriness associated with the word ‘foreigner’, provides the texture and structure to the novel.

Abbreviation used

The Foreigner - Foreigner

Works Cited

Primary Source

Joshi, Arun. The Foreigner. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1993.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 10 October 2011

Bala S. Devi, Ph.D.

Surrender to Surrender: An insight into Joshi’s *The Foreigner*

Secondary Sources

Fowler, Roger (Ed.). A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms. London: Routledge &

Kegan Paul. 1987.

Krishnamurti. J. Talks and Dialogues J.Krishnamurti. New York : Avon Books, 1970.

=====

P. Bala Shanmuga Devi, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of English
A.P.C. Mahalaxmi College for Women
Thoothukudi -628 002
Tamil Nadu
India
devibala25@yahoo.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 10 October 2011

Bala S. Devi, Ph.D.

Surrender to Surrender: An insight into Joshi's *The Foreigner*