

**Arun Joshi's Art and Skill:
Depicting East and West and Tradition and Modernity**

Dr. C. Ramya, M.B.A., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of English
E. M. G. Yadava College for Women
Madurai – 625 014
Tamil Nadu, India
rramyachelliah@gmail.com



Arun Joshi 1939-1993

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arun_Joshi

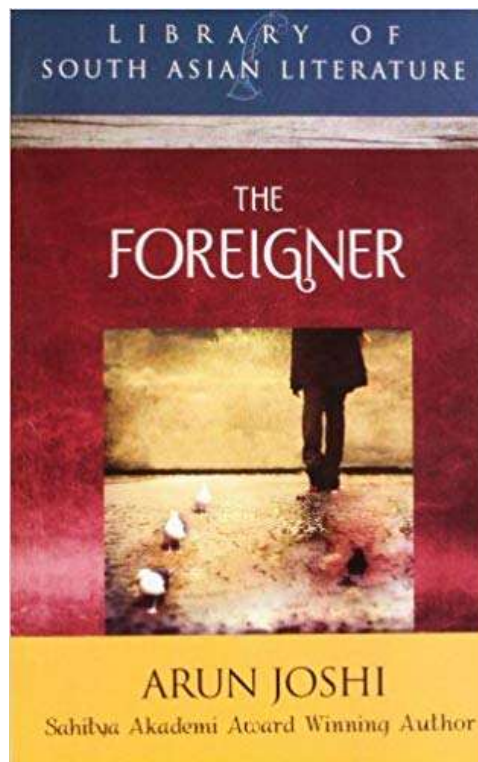
Abstract

This paper is an attempt to portray Arun Joshi's fictional art and skill as it depicts the blend of East and West, tradition and modernity. This paper brings out Arun Joshi's technique of amalgamating the past and present, the real and mythical and tradition and modernity through his characters. Thus, through various instances, this paper presents Arun Joshi as a novelist gifted with the power of depicting the blend of two extremes at a place.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, *The Foreigner*, *The Last Labyrinth*, Depiction of East and West, Tradition and Modernity, Amalgamation

Arun Joshi, one of the leading novelists in Indian English fiction, is seen to have established himself as a prominent Indian English novelist through his consistent commitment to handling the theme of alienation dexterously though he has published only four novels and a collection of short stories. Each novel is an extension of the earlier one with increased maturity, clarity and depth.

Against the individual, civilized and materialistic world, he prefers a life led by the primitive codes of faith, passion and sensuousness. There is an amalgamation of the past and the present, the real and the mythical, unfurling for the reader a new reading experience. While Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai's fiction are crises born out of marital discord, arising out of lack of understanding between man and woman, Joshi disentangles the multifarious facets of the crisis in an individual's psychic world. In the words of Mani Meitei, "Joshi is deeply disturbed when he sees the degradation of man as a result of the dominance of sterile intellect over the inner strength of life" (The Quest 12).



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Foreigner-Arun-Joshi/dp/8122201466/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=The+Foreigner+by+Arun+Joshi&qid=1571266516&s=books&sr=1-1

Arun Joshi's maiden novel *The Foreigner* published in 1968 is one of the most compelling existentialists' works of Indian English fiction. The novel is the study of an uprooted man Sindi Oberoi who reflects helplessly, the pathos of his meaningless past and equally meaningless future. Joshi is said to have formed a matrix of vision which contours the protagonist's crisis and quest for a meaningful stance of life. The existential agony and the deeper depths of human suffering are voiced through this novel. "In this novel, Joshi is a contemporary sensibility etching out the inner wasteland of the archetypal modern urban everyman" (Prasad 28).

Arun Joshi condemns detachment and inaction to be the inhibitory handicaps which create the problems of rootlessness, isolation and existence. An escapist attitude from one part of life to another would be of no help. One has to identify oneself with the world around, to a certain degree of intimacy, in order to procure self-knowledge and understanding.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:10 October 2019

Dr. C. Ramya, M.B.A., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Arun Joshi's Art and Skill: Depicting East and West and Tradition and Modernity

22

The Foreigner is a story based on the pathetic situation which arises on account of the lack of such coalescence. The protagonist Sindi Oberoi is a foreigner to both the Eastern and the Western cultures between which he is shuttled. He has developed in himself an improper pulsating ratio of both the cultures. At times, he seems close to a certain culture while at the same time he seems to be far removed from it. The novel, according to Hari Mohan Prasad, is “a blend of the western ethos pervading our modern urban life with the tradition and wisdom of India without distorting or superimposing on it” (P 43). The central message of Arun Joshi is to be of use to others. This has been asserted with religious fervour in all his works. Any action which causes destruction or pain to anyone is condemned. And if any inaction would mean pain to someone, it is all the more detested. When the protagonist finally understands this, the novelist concludes the novel with a suggestive note that Sindi is growing and has changed for good.

The novelist has successfully set two different stages for screening his story. While one half of the action is set in America, the latter half takes place in India. Both the countries stand juxtaposed against each other in their nature. While the former symbolizes the western, occident, urban and sophisticated, in a literal sense, the latter is an embodiment of entirely different ingredients. In *The Foreigner* and *The Last Labyrinth*, it so happens that the characters who believe and follow the values of tradition and culture, find their ease sooner or later than those, who prefer modernity. The former remains undisturbed by the waves of modern trends and manage to remain poised. Except for the protagonists in the two novels who try to bring a compromise between tradition and modernity, the other characters who stick on to the western culture are denuded of their certitude leaving them muddled creatures, more dead than alive. The novel could also be termed as a tale of tension between misinterpreted traditional values and modernity.

Just as the arena of action is twofold, one symbolising the traditional and the other modernity, the characters too could be categorized into two groups, one representing the traditional values of love, sincerity, genuineness, sacrifice, passion and empathy and the other guided by the tendency to be calculative, high-headed, self-centered, sensual, immature and blind to their follies and shortcomings India stands for traditional values. When Sindi pays his first visit to Babu’s house on his arrival in India, he notices a bronze figure of dancing Shiva behind which Sheila is seated at the head of the table. Sindi is “struck by the intense beauty of the divine dancer” (*The Foreigner* 14), for “America, India, Egypt, all mingled behind him in aeons of increasing rhythm” (*The Foreigner* 14). The ‘divine dancer’ symbolises both destructive fury and creative force. Sindi’s eye of wisdom has opened on coming to India. He has undergone transformation and he is now a new man capable of comparing the Indian vision of life, with the death-in-life existence he had led in America. The novelist symbolically informs the readers that Sindi is standing at the threshold of amelioration on reaching India.

Within a year of stay in India, he manages to observe and analyse Indian ethos very closely. Sindi has a keen observant intellect and he is well poised in the perception of his environment. He feels that Indians more or less end in making money. He feels sad for Indian women “who always

had their back arched, stooping to someone's service" (The Foreigner 183). Whatever it may be, Sindi had looked forward to coming to India with more interest than he had felt anywhere else. Though the flip of a coin decides his destination, he is very anxious to visit his ancestral land, which is no better a memory, than a skeletal outline which he carried about in his head, like a "Somnambulist's dream" (The Foreigner 150). But as the novel proceeds, this somnambulist is forced to wake-up to reality only in this land which carries the tradition and culture propagated by saints and sadhus, philosophers and philanthropists and still stands in favour of non-violence and all essential vitalities of moral life.

Joshi has ensured the smooth flow of the novel by making some characters shuttle between tradition and modernity, optimism and pessimism, positive and negative qualities. While some of them manage to shun their demerits and open their eyes towards a florescent future, the vice versa happens to some others. Unlike these two categories, there are those, who maintain a positive attitude irrespective of where and how they live. Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist undergoes a radical change from a negative and devastating attitude to that of a positive, constructive life. The most influential personalities who influence him on account of their own positivity and induce him to such a change are June, Blyth, Sheila and Muthu. Babu is a harmless and good young man but his half-baked nature makes him ship towards a negative path and brings about his death. Deprived of love during childhood, Sindi the protagonist, develops a deep sense of insecurity, unreality and impermanence about everything. He is serious, sensitive, asthmatic and most of the time withdrawn to himself. Being an orphan, he fears mockery and hence stays in his self-constructed cocoon and calls it 'detachment'. Devinder Mohan observes:

"He sees a destructive monster in the invariable structures of both American and Indian civilizations. In order to face this monster, he would rather be indifferent". (P 24)

His memories about Indian tradition, which his uncle and aunt tried to inculcate in him, are mere skeletons and tit bits. He tries to put some flesh on the skeletal frame and bring about some beauty in it but pathetically falls short of it. One could not blame Sindi for what he is. His ontological insecurity could do nothing more than make him a man concerned in preserving himself. He tries to justify and confirm his identity but has an unconscious fear of it being threatened and immediately withdrawn himself. But for a person who has no one to control him, no moral codes to apply and no tradition to stick on to, he is surprisingly a very good personality. He says,

"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 or another" (Foreigner 118).

Yet he has in fact, great regard for morality. He feels sorry for others' pain and does his best to pacify them. He readily responds to kindness and is very thankful to Mrs. Blyth for her hospitality and recognizes the streak of paternal affection when Mr. Khemka advises Sindi to be more sociable. The tears of Sheila and June always stir the worst in him. He is light-hearted, jovial and polite. He may not have the ability to communicate whatever little affection he could give but always hopes for more. He keeps wishing that God had given him, "... greater strength for enduring the burdens of friendship" (The Foreigner 18). His ever-cautious and alert mental preoccupation gives him a sad disposition, which escapes many eyes but those of June and Sheila. This gives almost a metaphysical dimension to his countenance. The strain is between the traditional spirit of the unconscious self and the modern attitude of the conscious self. The most influential factors which drive Sindi from alienation to arrival are those of June's death, Sheila's kindness and Muthu's advice.

June and Sheila are no doubt, optimistic and positive in their move. While June is a typically modern American lass, Sheila is a down to earth traditional Indian girl. But what Sindi sees in both of them is strikingly the same. He sees affection, love, tenderness and peace in both of them. The only person for whom Sindi has developed a liking in India is Sheila, who is presented as the embodiment of the essence of Indian womanhood, timid, calm, chaste, loving, devoted and decent in her outlook. Mr. Khemka is a negative character who sticks on to slate customs and obsolete conventions just because they are advantageous to him. Though all that are modern are not detestable, Mr. Khemka draws only the negative qualities of modernity. "When these wealthy Indian young men graduate from the life full of pleasures of sex, the next best thing they do is to look about with hawk-eyes to locate a meaty animal which they may peck at and gobble" (Chandra 102). The world of Mr. Khemka is entirely different from that of Sindi. While Sindi is a man who detests any sort of possession, to Mr. Khemka, even his son is a property which he possessed along with his factories Mr. Khemka is concerned with nothing but money-making Life for him is a calculated success formula. He has the self-confidence of the rich and feels justified in exploiting the poor. Tradition and religion are mere masks for him. Deep inside he is a typically modern man who is prepared to do anything for the sake of status, wealth and power. Babu characterises the typical eastern fantasies regarding the glamour which America provided. If Sindi is drifted, Babu is anchored too strongly. He visualizes the figure of the concept of enjoyment in life of the upper class people with their middle class morality and fears of consequence. His tragedy begins to sprout the moment he is ready to forget the values of his tradition in exchange for the pleasures of the flesh. He has an unmarried elder sister at home but yet he decides to marry June, though he is just twenty. His is an escapist attitude, thinking that marriage would help him improve in studies. He lives in a dream land and sex occupies him somewhere from behind acting as a catalytic agent.

When men like Khemka and Babu fail to relish the essence of our tradition, far from our culture, in a country where broken families are a common sight and people run mad races in pursuit of power and money, there stands a diamond in that dust. June Blyth refuses to succumb to the materialistic attitude of the west. When people around go with little concern for their fellowmen, June is always on a run to help the needy. She is on par with women like Sheila who live primarily to help others. June is an ideal girl who attracts Sindi. She is a typically modern girl and an

exceptionally positive character, free generous, humane and homely. No doubt, June stands for above Sindi and Babu for she practises what they had failed to do. June knows what soothed and solaced people. She is a sort of girl always on the run to help and please people. If vanity is for Sindi, money for Mr. Khemka, foolish innocence for Babu, love and care is for June. Sindi reflects,

“She revealed to me all that I was not and couldn’t hope to be” (The Foreigner, 56)

Though a modern girl, her optimism and positive qualities elevate her to a higher traditional plane. June, no doubt gives the image of a traditional wife whose only concern is to stand by her spouse in low and high tides. She is happy at his smile and sad at the squirm of his brow.

Traditional Indian culture and values lie dormant in the corridors of every Indian mind. These embers glow up when confronted with unfamiliar cultures. *The Last Labyrinth* is one such tale of the dilemma faced by an Indian mind in conflict with western orientation and education, on the one hand and native Indian tradition on the other. “Arun Joshi, the novelist of *The Last Labyrinth* reveals himself as a man who is convinced that western values do not provide peace, certitude and sublimity of self-fulfillment” (Prasad 94). A vision of the entire modern life, with awesome reality, bringing to the limelight the gruesome tragedy that industrialization and materialistic civilization have made of a poor soul is depicted.

Som Bhaskar, a young multimillionaire, craves for some substantial proof to know why one should have faith in the mystic concepts of our tradition. He keeps fruitlessly searching for such a proof, arguing that faith could not be ordered but should sprout out of inherent belief, which he pathetically hopes to get sooner or later. *The Last Labyrinth* can be seen as a tale happening in two cities, Benares and Bombay. As Guruprasad Thakur puts it, “one symbolizes the western, rational, industrial and technological world, the other, oriental, occult feudal and treacherous” (P 164). His attempt to bridge both the worlds gets him hopelessly confused. He searches for the purpose of life and believes that he needs to identify some means by which the two worlds could be combined. Joshi feels that men tend to get lost in the labyrinthine alleys of modern life. Disabled by modern civilization, they are unable to find means of getting out. Som, a son of this modern civilization finds himself hopelessly lost and unable to find the means to an end. The ever-roaring complexities of son’s spirit are symbolized by the sea in Bombay which often provides a sense of solace to Som and also to his father. It suits their inner turbulence which seems to be as endless as the sweeping waves of the Bombay sea.

On his traditional root being shaken, Som loses faith in life, for he suffers from a deadly disease. Anuratha successfully prays for Som’s recovery when the doctors had lost their hope during a massive heart attack. Here science had failed but faith had succeeded. Som initially looks at Anuradha as a ruined but handsome monument. Som states, “Hers was a city without a name, a city set in an oasis plundered a thousand times and waiting to be plundered again by men like Aftab and

me who forever lurked in its desert purlieus” (Last Labyrinth 37). They plundered no doubt, yet she loves and cares for them. This she has been able to accomplish after having undergone suffering:

“Her ego has been sublimated by suffering.
She can cut her wrist and lie composed
in a bathtub. She can efface herself for
others. Acute suffering has filled her
will milk of human kindness and she feels
for one and all” (Prasad 99).

For her, whatever she does is a sacrifice and more than a sensual satisfaction. She has bridged both the worlds of tradition and modernity, the spirit and the body, her intellect and emotion. This blend of both the worlds has lent her a personality entirely different from anyone whom Som had encountered. This is the greatest victory of Anuradha. Anuradha does identify herself with Krishna, with lepers and beggars. She is a living example of the Gita says of doing one’s duty regardless of the reward. She is a candle burning herself to help others.

Thus, it is seen that Som, the anti-hero of the modern world embodies chaos, being caught in two charms – money and women. He has experienced notions of his own self and also of others. He lacks the moral strength to see things in their proper perspectives. One half of his self has a traditional instinct and the other being a modern impulse. From this, it can be understood that Arun Joshi is a novelist gifted with the power of depicting the blend of two opposing worlds of the East and the West, faith and doubts.

Works Cited

1. Chandra, Suresh. “The High Culture Fiction of Arun Joshi and Uma Vasudev”.
Culture and Criticism New World Literature Series.
Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1987.
2. Joshi, Arun. *The Last Labyrinth*.
New Delhi: Vision Books (Pvt.) Ltd, 1981.
3. ----- *The Foreigner*.
New Delhi: Vision Books (Pvt.) Ltd, 1990.
4. Meitei, Mani. M. “The Strange Case of Billy Biswas: Awareness of worlds within worlds”.
The Quest. Vol.4, No.2, Dec. 1990, P.12.
5. Mohan, Devinder. “The Language of the Splintered Mirror: The Fiction of Arun Joshi”.
Ariel. Vol.14, No.4, Oct. 1983, P.24.
6. Prasad, Hari Mohan. From Alienation to Arrival: The Foreigner”. *Arun Joshi*.
New Delhi: Arnold – Heinemann, 1985.

7. Thakur, Guruprasad. "The Lost Lonely Questers
of Arun Joshi's Fiction."
The Fictional World of Arun Joshi. Ed. R. K. Dhawan.
New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, 1986, P.164.