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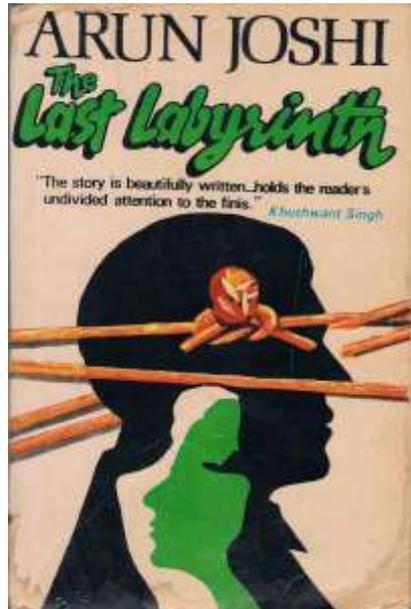
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Women Characters in Arun Joshi's Novels - An Embodiment of Human Values

Shivani Vashist, Ph.D.



Arun Joshi and His Novels – Emphasis on the Senselessness of Contemporary Life

Arun Joshi's literary career began in 1960's. He produced 5 novels and a short story collection *The Survivor*. His novels emphasise the absurdity and senselessness of contemporary life in which technological domination has reduced man to a marionette caught up in life's chaotic surge with no avenue to escape. Almost all his protagonists represent common man's disenchantment with materialistic aggrandisement. The novelist shows the

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hollowness of relationships and the absence of any ameliorating vision in a world order dominated by technology through several incidents.

Arun Joshi's Female Characters

Much emphasis has been given to Joshi's male characters, but his female characters too need due recognition. His novels are replete with association and interaction of protagonists with women characters who are the torch bearers to the ones caught in the labyrinth.

Kathy and Anna

Joshi's first novel, *The Foreigner* is the story of a youth born of an English mother and an Indian father who died when he was only four, his uncle in Kenya brought him up. In England, where Sindi had his early education, he had amorous relationships with Anna and Kathy. Anna, a woman of about thirty-five, a minor artist and separated from her husband, gets physically involved with Sindi just to regain "her lost youth" (143). Once she regains her self-respect, she deserts him without any consideration for his feelings. Kathy also leaves him after having intimate relations with him for a few weeks to go back to her husband because "she thought marriage was sacred and had to be maintained at all costs" (144).

Sindi's futile association with both these women characters, Anna and Kathy, gives a distinct shape to his character and personality. Another female character in the novel is June who embodies human values. She feels entrapped by the materialistic entropy of the American society. She also attempts to provide inner peace and contentment to Sindi.

Billy and Tuula

Chronologically the second novel by Arun Joshi is *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. Tuula is perhaps the first person to correctly read Billy's mind. She correctly perceives Billy's acute awareness of the incongruity of the modern civilisation influenced by materialistic aggrandisement. Billy, due to his hypersensitivity, is constantly haunted by the call from the primitive world which is still uncontaminated by the sophistications, restraints and interference of the civilised world wherein lie the roots of man. Tuula informs Romi that Billy is "an exceptional person" (22) and "feels something inside him... A great force, *urkraft*, a... a primitive force" (23).

Billy and Meena

Billy comes back to India and is appointed Professor of Anthropology at the Delhi University. His mother introduces him to Meena, a pretty young daughter of a retired civil servant. He hurriedly gets married to Meena. Meena represents the hollowness and superficiality of the modern phoney society and lacks that "rare degree of empathy" that could have enabled her to understand her husband's vexed mind (185). Her lack of empathy and "sufficient idea of human suffering" leads to a marital fiasco.

Meena's upbringing, her ambitions, twenty years of contact with a phoney society - all had ensured that she should not have it. So, "the more I tried to tell her what was corroding me, bringing me to the edge of despair so to speak, the more resentful she became" (185). Billy is soon estranged from her. She herself acknowledges to Romi "perhaps I just don't understand him as a wife should" (76). Meena in reality is a hollow character, truly symbolic of her generation. Her incapacities are generic, rather than individual:

He feels terribly sick of the post- independence upper class Indian society lost in the superfluity of life. The 'kitch' culture of the affluent India which his wife Meena, the daughter of a civil servant and educated in the best missionary convent, represents, drives him out of the society (Mathur and Rai 1980:35)

Billy and Bilasia

Contrary to Meena is Bilasia. Through her Billy receives "the truest perceptions of life" which were elusive and communicable only in the language of visions (142). She represents the purest essence of a life affirming source. Billy's union with Bilasia is not only the union of two bodies, but also an attempt of a split-self to realise the whole. Bilasia represents real love as opposed to Meena who is a representative of the greedy mercenary civilisation.

Bilasia is the essence of the primitive force who helped Billy to replace his restlessness with "Divine serenity" (Urmil 2001: 58). Unlike Meena who had repelled and deadened it, she is able to enliven Billy's soul.

Tuula – Total Disregard for Money

Like Bilasia, Tuula, an educated and sensitive woman, also has a great influence on Billy. Devoid of exhibitionism or self-consciousness, which was common in other people living in a phoney materialistic world, Tuula attracts him because of her "total disregard of money" (176). She follows a simple philosophy of life based on "hindu beliefs" that establishes need of a minimum of goods for survival by man (176). She embodies extraordinary intuition and empathy, which Meena lacks and, thus, is unable to understand her husband.

Leela in *The Last Labyrinth*

In *The Last Labyrinth*, Leela symbolises the scientific attitude and also showcases its inability to impart inner satisfaction to man. Bhaskar is attracted towards her fetish for analysis and explanation. Though he maintains sexual relationship with her for six months, yet is still baffled with her:

She analysed like others breathe. If we are talking of compulsions, there was a woman who had compulsions- to talk, to analyse. There was nothing that she could not work out through cool analysis: the universe, the living and the dead, worlds seen and unseen (78).

Leela reads and analyses, but she has little knowledge about "the roots of the world's confusion" (80). Bhaskar tells her about his emptiness and the voices that he hears all the

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time. She feels concerned, analyses his problem but is unable to solve it. Bhaskar frankly remarks:

Leela Sabnis was a muddled creature. As muddled as me. Muddled by her ancestry, by marriage, by divorce, by too many books. When she made love-when she made love, the confusion momentarily lifted. But immediately after, as she stood smoking looking down at me... The confusion descended in one roaring storm (77-78).

Som Bhaskar's affair with Leela Sabnis fizzles out as it does not give him any sense of true belonging. Bhaskar's mother's reliance on faith and his father's fetish for knowledge goad him to leave Leela.

Geeta

Bhaskar's wife Geeta is an embodiment of trust and faith, "it enveloped her, this trust, like the amniotic fluid envelopes the embryo protecting her slim shanks and tender white arms" (63). Bhaskar, on the other hand, is totally devoid of it. From the very beginning he is very much aware of his handicap.

I needed the trust- who doesn't? I needed it all the more because i did not trust myself, or my men, or my fate, or the ceaseless travel on the social wheel. Between the empty home and the cluttered offices-so many men, unknown, unknowable, each with a quiver of axes to grind –between these two poles of existence, friendless in a city i did not love and which, for that matter, did not love me, even though it eyed my money, in this whore of a city what i needed most was to be reassured that all was well (63).

Geeta is the perfect wife anyone can ever dream for - she is intelligent, sophisticated, "aware of the pitfalls of the world", sensible, loving and trusting (63). When Bhaskar meets Geeta, it is basically her trust in life that draws him towards her. "If discontent is my trademark, trust is Geeta's... Geeta trusts like birds fly, like fish swim" (63). Geeta, like Bhaskar's mother and Anuradha, is a firm believer of religion and has great enthusiasm for temples, shrines, saints and astrologers. Bhaskar, though married her and possessed her physically, is unable to understand her. "Why then this trust in the world's mechanism, this faith that the engine shall not seize, or worse, explode" (63). Her endurance, equanimity and certitude - qualities so completely lacking in Bhaskar, make her look like a "child of another world, traversing, like a plane at a higher altitude" (69).

The novel projects the contrast between Bhaskar's obsession with doubt and reason, and Geeta's unwavering reliance on trust and faith. Despite Bhaskar's "little fascinations" that puzzle her, she has only an enduring trust in him (73).

Anuradha and Bhaskar

Bhaskar's relentless and hysterical pursuit of Anuradha is a traumatic affair that makes him aware of the meaningless existence in the modern civilisation and brings him face to face

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with the absurdity and senselessness of the urbanised civilised world. Bhaskar's first encounter with Anuradha takes place first at a meeting of the Plastic Manufacturer's Association in Delhi Intercontinental Hotel where he has gone strictly from business point of view. Being an ambitious person, he is bent upon grabbing Aftab's company. But when he meets Anuradha, he is fascinated by her charm and determines to wrench her away from her husband along with the shares of the company. Anuradha, of indeterminable age and origin, gradually becomes more and more the centre of his life.

Anuradha is an illegitimate child of an insane mother, who was molested in her childhood. She has witnessed "murders, suicides, every conceivable evil of the world" (190). As K, a character in *The Last Labyrinth* puts it, "you know, Som, my life has been spent amidst misery and suffering but I know of no other human being who suffered as much as Anuradha" (189-90). She possesses Bhaskar's mother's unfailing faith in Krishna, the inhuman suffering she has undergone also endows her with an understanding of certain fundamentals of life. She is endowed with a rare insight and intuitive power, and Bhaskar is not able to resolve her mystery. She seems to him, "[...] 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" (37).

Joshi's Fascination with *Shakti*

Anuradha is Bhaskar's 'shakti' and it is through her only that he can find solution to his predicament. Joshi seems to have a strange fascination for this concept. In his interview with Piciucco, he remarks that 'shakti' is "the Indian worship of the Mother Goddess, of the Divine Mother, a thing which is also common in your parts...People have experienced it quite similarly. That concept is not that the Queen or the female power is stronger than male, but rather she creates everything for the pleasure of man. How and why, do not know?" (1997:94).

Bhaskar gets extremely frustrated in his yearning for Anuradha because he does not know how to possess her. Back in Bombay, Bhaskar learns more about Anuradha and her past from K, his family doctor, and his curiosity further increases. The more he comes to know about her, the more mysterious she appears to him. He reflects:

There was a mystery about Anuradha that I had yet to crack... She should have been transparent. Why should she appear mysterious unless, possibly, there was a mystery within me that in her proximity, gets somehow stirred as one tuning fork might stir another (89)

Certain characters in *The Last Labyrinth* besides being the living creatures are also the symbols. Geeta symbolises endurance, faith and trust. Anuradha is Bhaskar's *Shakti*.

Thus Arun Joshi, in almost all his novels, has endeavoured to present women characters with firm belief and trust on human values. The women characters are the main source of inspiration to the protagonists and assist them to follow the correct path. Also the contrast

between the virtuous life of female characters and vicious life of the protagonists make the distinction more striking. The women characters play a vital role in Joshi's novels.

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