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ARUN JOSHI: READING HIS NOVELS AS REFLECTIONS FROM DHARAMSHAstras

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ABSTRACT

Arun Joshi's works read like the spiritual odyssey of twentieth century man who has lost his spiritual moorings and is roaming bewildered and confused. By delineating the turbulent inner world of his protagonists, he highlights the fact that the need for a profound change in our modes of living emerges not only as a psychological demand arising from the pathogenic nature of our present social character, but also as a condition for the sheer survival of human race. His explorations into the complexities of life impinging on the individual often lead to a groping for strategies of survival harking back to affirmations deeply embedded in the faith of his ancestors and Dharamshastras. The great traditions of India need to be communicated to the world. These traditions are beneficial for the balance, adventure and a sense of direction, it is bound to give, to our inchoate schizophrenic modern world. Shruti and Smriti traditions provide us with a conceptual framework whereby we make sense of the world and define our place in it. Arun Joshi has renounced the larger world in favor of the inner man. Joshi has integrated the ancient wisdom and consciousness into the texture of his novel. Joshi does not portray a nihilistic negation of life. His protagonists are aware of the suffocating constraints but they struggle to transcend them and liberate themselves into a beautifully abandoned exuberance.

Until very recently Indian society was a traditional one, admitting social changes nevertheless but absorbing all changes in terms of the flowing tradition. The main ideological and cultural prop of this tradition was the vast storehouse that accumulated through the centuries, a huge mass of myths and legends that became the common property of all the people of the land. These myths and legends which were the sources of the equally vast storehouse of images and symbols, ideas and concepts, shaped and formed the mind and imagination of our people all over the land. by and large, at any rate of the more conscious and articulate ones. Regional variations

there certainly were of the myths and legends, etc. and of individual and group variations of consciousness and articulation: but despite all variations, their commonness was always and invariably more than evident and all our early and medieval regional literatures could not but register their strong imprint. And since the Shruti and Samriti shaped and formed the peoples' behaviour pattern, and their general attitudes and approaches to life. Until our own times, therefore, there is an easily recognizable "Indianness" in all our literatures, and this characteristic Indianness is, in the ultimate analysis, traceable to the totality of what one may call the myth of India, using the term myth in its sociological and socio-anthropological connotation.

But today this traditional India is in the throes of vast changes that are intended to carry the Indian people from the shores of the medieval to those of the modern world. In the process much of what I have called the Indian myth is slowly and steadily withering away, and much of its grip on the mind and imagination of the people in general and socially conscious and articulate individuals in particular is definitely lost. To a very large extent, this is but inevitable, and yet the fact remains that what gave to our literatures their Indian character was the Indian myth and the set of values and attitudes it generated and sustained from our Dharamshastras. The question that inevitably arises is: would there be then any Indian literature in the sense we are speaking of when the so-called process of modernization had run its full circle?

A certain residue of the myth will perhaps remain, not so much in its elements of value and faith, as sources of images and symbols bereft of much of their meaning and significance, and hence their sustaining quality. To what extent this will help our literatures to retain their common denominator of "Indianness" is a question which is not very easy to answer.

The remedy, therefore, lies, to my mind, in seeking to re-interpret the old myth in terms of the new and changing situation in India, and in trying to build up new myths that would outstrip and override the boundaries of the regional, social and linguistic situation and draw in the totality that is India. The task is not an easy one, but if we are to have an Indian literature genuinely so called, we must then have an Indian myth that can inform and sustain that literature. Let us not forget that even the form and style of a given piece of writing is ultimately traceable to the myth and the set and structure of values embodied in it.

There is, however, another feature of our creative expression in art and literature as known through the ages. that has a characteristic "Indianness" about it, and which is a common feature in all our regional articulations in art and literature: it is the peculiar nature and character of our perception, sensitivity and sensibility, which may have been due as much to the ethnic character of our people and geographical features of the land as to the historical and cultural conditioning undergone through centuries. But be that as it may, the fact remains that our reactions

and responses to facts and situations of human life and the life of nature are characteristically different from those of many other peoples of the world.

Briefly our passage to the reality of things is not so much through ratiocination as through sense, perception and through intuitive insight which is only another name for perception at a higher and deeper level. Indian literature is one in its philosophical detachment. 'While the one bird eats, the other watches' said the Upanishads. We believe in a fullness of life and a ripeness of experience, and so our literature did not discard any aspect of our social life. The Mahabharata contains the loftiest heights of human liberalism (There is no religion higher than Man) and also describes the vilest passion in its lower depths. This non- attachment gives a peculiar complexity to the character of our literature.

An understanding of philosophical foundations of Indian mind through Shruti and Smriti traditions, is integral to Indianness. Smriti tradition is cultural framework which is open ended and interactive. They provide us with a conceptual framework whereby we make sense of the world and define our place in it, both as individuals and as members of human groups. While we inherit culture as tradition, we constantly modify it as we encounter modern life, as we change groups or incorporate the perceptions of others. Today it is impossible to be content with the simple, and untenable idea that our past or culture can provide all the values, all the answers that we need. Old insights cannot be the answer of the agonies of the new situations. Many things have happened since and these cannot be put into strait jackets of 'Shastras, however, liberal. Art, Stephen Spender had once said, is a Hindu temple where many gods co-exist. Not only co-exist but also co-fertilize No culture that has survived for any significant period of time, has been totally homogeneous, static and self- sufficient.

It is the purpose of Smriti as traditions to adopt the Vedic wisdom to changing Indian society. It is an open process which has influenced not only Oriental but Occidental cultures as well. As Dharmashastras remain a pre dominant force, an inspiration to braver and nobler living in the present day existential world. Its deep holistic and religious significance has seeped to the literature of various languages too.

Arun Joshi stands almost alone among the Indian English novelists who has broken new grounds. Joshi has renounced the larger world in favour of the inner man. Joshi's novels provide an Indian response to the challenges of our time process of adjustment of the time defying Indian wisdom of Dharamshastra to the new cultural values of the modern world are studied through the crises of Joshi's heroes from the upper -crust of Indian society who face the dilemma of meaninglessness the most, Joshi's heroes like the sages self-examine and search their souls to find a clue to the intricate labyrinth of life and arrive at a personal equilibrium and fulfillment. Joshi has integrated the ancient Indian wisdom and consciousness into the texture of his novels with clarity and intellectual

sophistication and awareness of its relevance to the contemporary context. He highlights the internal metaphysical and ethical questions through the Gita which is not merely a scripture but a universal document which embodies men's perpetual doubts, withdrawals, quests and involvement as much as an affirmation of faith. Joshi has referred not only to the Gita and its message, but the men's anguish, the dilemma and his quest and then arrival.

The human scene mirrored in the contemporary writing is a multitude of isolated units - a lonely crowd or a crowd of lonely men. The man and woman go on living and partly living. They collide but do not meet; talk but do not communicate. It is as if they are drifting in a void. Man's isolation is from within not without. Modern men as George Luckas, the Hungarian writer points out is "by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationship with other human beings."1

In his first novel *The Foreigner*2, Arun Joshi explores the individual's anguished consciousness of being isolated from the whole apparatus of social convention and ritual. Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist finds himself in the predicament of an outsider. An Indian by origin, brought up in Kenya, educated in London and America, he clearly does not belong and drifts restlessly on the surface of life. He says to Mr. Khemka:

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... I have no reason to be one thing rather than another (143-144).

Sindi is devoid of emotion, having no respect for society or religion. He believes that "there is no end to suffering, no end to the struggle between good and evil."(43) He finds no purpose in life, a kind of aimlessness:" Somebody had begotten me without a purpose and so far I had lived without a purpose, unless you could call the search for peace, a purpose." (65). His complete involvement with self only results in the doom and death of his friend Babu and June. His dissatisfaction with the mechanical apparatus of life leads him on to a quest for identity and integration with the society.

In a mood of despair that envelopes his being like water surrounding a fish, Sindi his second insight into the nature of life: "Detachment at that time had meant inaction. Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it." (204). In the unjust, corrupt world of Mr. Khemka, Sindi gets the opportunity to practice what he has learnt out of his long quest- action without detachment. His pre-occupation with self seems to be crumbling and gradually he gins to feel sympathy for the laborer's working for Mr. Khemka. It was a sad sight. The workers' clothes were falling off in rags and sweat poured fir backs as if they had just had a shower. What was the point in all big men like Mr. Khemka talking about God and pain so long as half nakemen had to wrestle with a beastly mass of concrete under a scorching sun? And all for three rupees a day. (209) .

The "accumulated despair of their weary lives" (240), makes him take over the management of the imprisoned Mr. Khemka's business: I felt as if I had been dropped on 2 sinking ship and charged with the impossible task of taking it ashore (239-240) Deeply aware of this new orientation in his way of life and thought, he gives a new orientation to his name too, and instead of 'Surendra' or 'Surrinder he called himself "Surrender Oberoi." (242). He had craved for a transcendental vision to create something permanent amidst the haze of quixotic experience of contemporary culture. But now Sindi understands that detachment does not mean escape or alienation; it means involvement, devotion and sacrifice. Man's authentic existence manifests itself not in escapist philosophy of passive detachment but in active involvement and not with the self but with the world.

The most besetting problem that man faces today is the problem of meaninglessness. As Edmund Fuller remarks, in our age" man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine, and ruin , but from inner problem...a conviction of isolation, randomness, (and) meaningless in his way of existence."3 Arun Joshi tries to understand the labyrinth of life. Shyam Asnani says that Joshi's skill lies in "ability to describe experience in a human voice so that the texture of the experience comes through, and his ability to convey the philosophical moral complexities of human life without losing the life itself."4

Today man fails to perceive the very purpose behind life and the relevance of his existence in a hostile world. Notwithstanding scientific and technological advancements, the contemporary modern man is doomed to find himself in tragic mess. The drag of social conventions and traditions, the changing value system consequent upon the impact of rapid modernization accruing from industrialization and urbanization, the inter-generational tension engendered with changing ethos make increasing demands on the individual and push him towards meaninglessness of life.

Arun Joshi's works read like the spiritual odyssey of twentieth century man who has lost his spiritual moorings and is roaming bewildered and confused. By delineating the turbulent inner world of his protagonists, he highlights the fact that the need for a profound change in our modes of living emerges not only psychological demand arising from the pathogenic nature of our present social character, but also as a condition for the sheer survival of human race. His explorations into the complexities of life impinging on the individual often lead to a groping for strategies of survival barking back to affirmations deeply embedded in the faith of his ancestors and Dharamshastras .

Deprived of the succor of ancient wisdom, which provided the much-needed basis for value and meaningfulness in life, the modern man has no substitute for faith and religion except science and information technology. Aldous Huxley points out that "ours is a world in which knowledge accumulates and wisdom decays."

Through Sindi, Joshi illustrates what the Gita said: "one has to understand what action is, and likewise one has to understand what is wrong action and one has to understand about inaction. And to understand is the way of the work." (IV,17). Thus the Gita has a pragmatic approach which inspires to act', to make decisions and take chances in life, they can lead to a better world. The myopic approach of Sindi distorts his attitude towards life and makes him skeptic about every human involvement.

Sindi Oberoi, presents the dilemma of rootlessness, insecurity and anomie, which has become a stigma for today's youth. Yet, beyond his superficial experience of spiritual degeneration, he also conveys a sense of something miraculous in human life and his relationship with the society. It is this that continuously attracts our imagination, elevating and enlarging our consciousness, and enabling us to realize a definite value system or moral order in all its virtue, grandeur and inscrutability. Sindi craves for a transcendental vision to create something permanent amidst the haze of quixotic experiences of contemporary culture. He wants to "redeem his past ". His sympathy with Mutthu; and other lowly paid workers at Khemka's factory and the consequent actions represents a selfless association with them, which certainly is the harbinger of a universal brotherhood. Joshi seems to suggest Dharma is not a creed or religion but a mode of life or a code of conduct, which regulates a man's works or activities as a member of society and as an individual and is intended to bring about the gradual development of a man to enable him to reach what is deemed to be the goal of human existence. Infinite compassion towards one's fellow being is almost a pre-condition of being an ethical person. Sindi realizes the massive suffering, which lay behind the vacant eyes of Muthu's companions. The men looked up at him " unblinking their expressionless faces reflecting neither love nor skepticism but only the accumulated despair of their weary lives... God alone knew what massive suffering lay behind their vacant eyes. It also overwhelmed me." (240)

Joshi suggests that the miseries of the world are caused by misconceptions and distorted egoistic perspectives of the viewer himself. Again, he makes it clear that true happiness can be attained only when the self is merged with the larger life of the people, negating isolated individuality. Sindi wants to come to 'grips with life' (207) and society and ultimately evolves a path of personal and universal salvation from within himself. In *The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas*, Billy escapes with a world of wilderness, renounces a life of comforts and luxuries. There he realizes that one could attain happiness not by rigid penance and self- mortification but by participation in life vigorously and whole heartedly. Joshi does not postulate a study in negation of life to soar higher and higher towards perfection but striving with a life affirming zeal. His protagonists finally realize that one cannot live for oneself because no human act is performed in isolation and without consequence. Each act should be performed with a sense of responsibility. Hence out of an acute sense of alienation and a quest to understand the meaning of

life, they derive a meaningful consolation when they learn to associate themselves with the society. Man must act as a torchbearer for his fellow beings. Thus, Arun Joshi's novels do not portray a nihilistic negation of life. His protagonists are aware of the suffocating constraints and the imaginative stasis of their milieu, but they struggle to transcend it and liberate themselves into a beautifully abandoned exuberance. Joshi expresses the philosophy of Smriti traditions and never talks of isolated and individual perfection of bliss. All his novels vigorously present the idea that the ultimate bliss lies in the identification of individual desires with the masses.

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