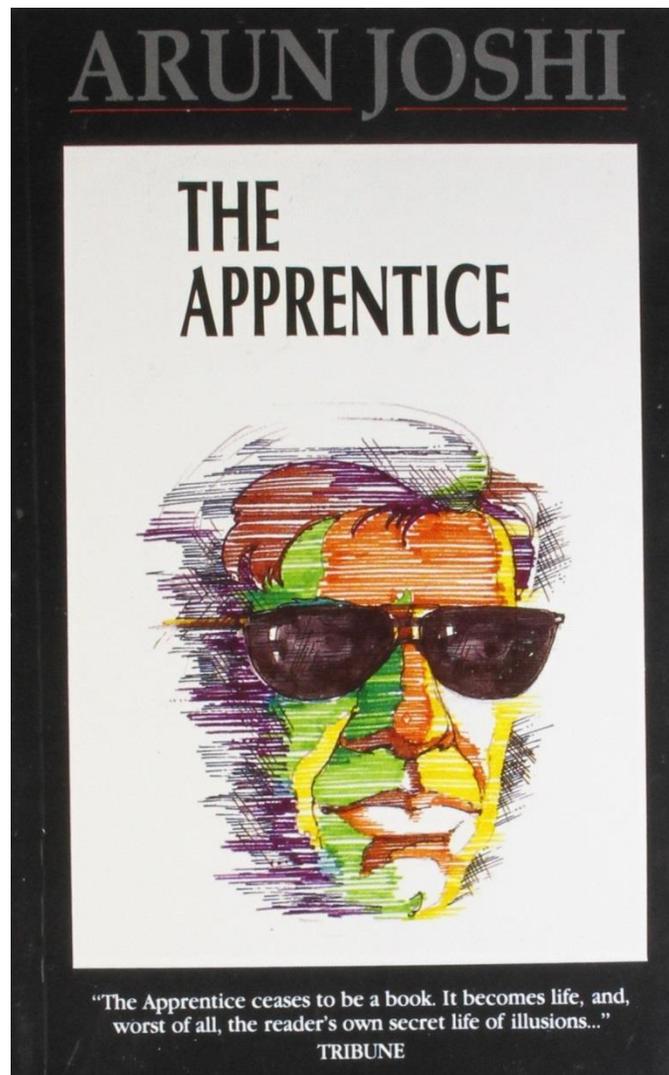

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Dr. R. Anuja, MBA, M.Phil., Ph.D., Editor

Aspects of Gender Conflict in English Literature

Role of Women as Depicted in the Novels of Arun Joshi

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Abstract

Arun Joshi (1938-1993) novelist and author of short-stories was born in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. Earning his M.S. from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA and returned to

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India to pursue a career in the corporate world and rose to become the Executive Director of Shri Ram Centre for Industrial Relation and Human Resources in New Delhi. Arun Joshi won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1982 for *The Last Labyrinth*. Role of women in literature is often portrayed as secondary character and supporting role. In Joshi's novels much emphasis has been given to male characters, but his female characters need due recognition. Through this paper an attempt is made here to study women characters in Arun Joshi's novels, *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, *The Apprentice*, *The Last Labyrinth*, **and** *The City and The River*.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, women in Arun Joshi's novels, *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, *The Apprentice*, *The City and The River*

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas

In Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* a friend who understands Billy is Tuula Lindgren, the Swedish lady of thirty years, who has come to United State for advance training in a psychiatric course and has extraordinary intuition, understands the dilemma of Billy's life fully. She comes to know what goes on inside his "dark, inscrutable, unsmiling eyes". (p.15) As for herself she is strongly interested in "India especially in the tribal people, a subject about which Billy knew enough to keep her engaged not one but a hundred nights". (p.17-18) She is in search of finding "a psychiatric explanation of the concepts of ritual and taboo". (p.18) As she talks in one breath of yoga and Gandhi, she is also in search of finding a Freudian explanation of Gandhi's non-violence. Billy occasionally discusses his problems with Tuula and she would Freud-like tell him: "...in a very mild form such hallucinations occurred in every one – all art in a way flowed out of them," and gave her friendly advice that "I should not encourage them too much". (181)

It was she who had insight into Billy's mind. Tuula's assessment of Billy's character is very correct and it is what she terms in German urcraft which explode in Billy's life and he escapes in to the tribal world of civilization leaving the members of his family including his wife and son. Meena Chatterjee, wife of the protagonist Billy Biswas is a product of the modern civilization. She is "quite usually pretty in a western sort of way" (37), loquacious and hallow.

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They get married but Meena cannot hold his soul. She cannot satisfy his inner urge. His soul gets hurt and estranged. He does not touch Meena for many months. Billy and Meena cannot communicate and respond to each other. He confides to Romi that:

It might have been saved if Meena had possessed a rare degree of empathy or even a sufficient idea of human suffering. These, I am afraid, she did not have. Her upbringing, her ambitions, twenty years of contact with a phony society- all had ensured that she should not have it. So the more I tried to tell her what corroding me, bringing me to the edge of despair so to speak, the more resentful she became (133).

With the increasing gap between Meena and Billy, he turns towards Rima Kaul, a girl in Bombay. Billy finds Rima different from Meena. He gets down to Rima Kaul who has been in love with him since the day she meet him. His trips to Bombay bring him close to her. However, for him, Rima is not a sex symbol but an embodiment of that empathy which Meena lacks.

In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Tuula is first person who can understand the dilemma of Billy's mind. After that this is Meena, Billy's wife. In spite of being Billy's wife she is unable to pacify his inner tension because of the superficiality of the modern phony society. After having an affair with Rima Kaul he comes on a conclusion that women body of this phony society cannot satisfy him. Bilasia, a primitive girl, also has a great influence on Billy. After possessed her Billy thought she is right women who can raise spirit of his soul. In this way all these women characters are the main source of inspiration to the protagonist Billy Biswas. They play a vital role in his life and made a great effect on his mind and heart.

The Foreigner

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. He had enamored relationships with Anna and Kathy. Sindi's futile association with both these women characters, Anna and Kathy, gives a distinct shape to his character and personality. Another

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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.

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. 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 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-yes-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 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. 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

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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).

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 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)

To Conclude

Joshi's novels are replete with association and interaction of protagonists with women characters who are the torch bearers to the ones caught in the labyrinth. Almost all his protagonists represent common man's disenchantment with materialistic aggrandisement. The novelist shows the hollowness of relationships and the absence of any ameliorating vision in a world order.

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