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Human Predicament and Meaninglessness of Life in the Novels of Arun Joshi

N. Venugopal, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Abstract

Among the Indian English Writers who qualify as existentialist, Arun Joshi is one of the supreme novelists whose novels are strongly influenced by the existential philosophy. His journey of fictional works is characterized by a sense of alienation and existential predicament. His novels consistently record the sensitivity, assessment and declarations about life. Joshi's fictional work comes across with nothingness and the tenuousness of human existence of modern life and depicts that man is shocked to find that he is no longer the master of his destiny and there are forces, which threaten to wither his life and all its joys and hopes.

Introduction

Joshi's protagonists are angst-ridden characters who are searching for dignity of life, which is ugly and painful. All the heroes suffer from restlessness and to escape this feeling they make relentless efforts, looking for a purpose in life.

The present century has seen the closure of old certainties and dogmas as, Paul Brunton observes: "never before were so many people plunged in so much uncertainty, so much perplexity and unsettlement". (7)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 2 February 2012

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824

Human Predicament and Meaninglessness of life

In his first novel *The Foreigner* itself, Joshi analyses the problem of meaninglessness in life. The protagonist Sindi's alienation is of the soul and not the geography. Right from the beginning, he is oppressed by a desire to find the meaning of life and his entire life is geared around his quest for performance in life.

In the very beginning of their encounter June tells Sindi:

There is something strange about you, you know. Something distant. I'd guess that when people are with you they don't feel like they're with a human being. May be it's an Indian characteristic, but I have a feeling you'd be a foreigner anywhere. (33)

Living in a World of Intense Pleasure

In his eagerness to find out meaning of life, Sindi lives in a strange world of intense pleasure and almost equally intense pain. Sindi's sufferings are manifestations of a spiritual crisis, which all sensitive people have to face today. He does not "fit in" in the world and his way of life becomes intolerable and he even contemplates suicide. The feeling of his nakedness in the hands of existence grew with every passing day. Sindi's sense of detachment and rootlessness is evident when June asks him where he was from. Sindi reaction to the question provides a clue to his existence.

"Everybody always asked me the same silly question". "Where are you from? As if it really mattered a great deal where I was from." (23)

Foreignness in Life

Sindi is the kind of foreigner who feels the pangs of his foreignness in 'any circumstance and any country'. He has merely learnt to be detached from the world.

I saw myself as I had always been an uprooted young man living in the latter half of the twentieth century who had become detached from everything expect myself. (195)

Increasing Sense of Alienation through the Process of Personal Suffering

Sindi is upset at the death of Babu. His sense of alienation becomes acute and he wants to move away from America in search of mental peace, it is unbearable for him to stay there anymore. The feeling of his nakedness in the hands of existence grew every passing day and a strong urge possessed him to once again roam the streets of the world.

Seeking Companionship

Diagnosing Sindi's sense of loneliness, a physician advises him to have a girl for companionship. His love for June does remedy for his loneliness but his love is detached and consequently he feels alienated from her. His relationship with June is objective and he tries constantly to avoid any type of involvement with her. When Babu gets ready to marry June, Sindi has a word of caution for him:

Women are desirable creatures but they can also hurt you... In your part of the world you marry only once in a lifetime. It is quite a serious matter. Don't just rush into a wrong thing for a temporary need. (134)

Sindi realizes that for about twenty years he has moved whichever way life has led him and has merely learnt to be detached from the world.

Theme of Meaninglessness

Joshi deals with the same theme of meaninglessness in "**The Strange Case of Billy Biswas**" also. Billy, the protagonist feels terribly unhappy with his life and runs away to jungle. Even before his physical disappearance into jungles, Billy ceased to belong to the world. It is not an escape from life and its realities but an escape into what he considers being the real life, far from the maddening crowd and the sordid, meaningless existence in the civilized world. He often wonders whether civilization is anything more than making or spending of money. Billy's strange case represents the universal myth of primitive in the heart of man ever alienating him from the superficial banalities of modern civilization.

Unexplained Strange Sensation

Billy's case has been strange from his very childhood. When he was only fourteen saw the tribal dance, drink, and sing, a strange sensation took over him and he became restless since that time and the civilized men are estranged to him and also have an intense hatred of them.

Closer to madness, the terrible madness of a man who after great sin and much suffering finally finds himself in the presence of his god." (142)

Billy Biswas is by training and by his natural aptitude an anthropologist. Renouncing his past, his family and the everyday world, Billy goes in search of meaning of life and feels like a fish out of water. Romi Sahai meets Billy after a lapse of three years and is surprised to find him in a mental condition:

The Plight of Modern Man

Joshi's "**The Apprentice**" also represents the plight of the modern man. Ratan Rathore's experience in life is humiliating. Ratan is almost invariably in a high strong mental condition,

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which threatens to ravage his soul and deprive him of his personality and identity. Ratan's dilemma is typical of an average product of this highly sophisticated civilization with a troubled conscience. He goes to place to place without finding any peace or solace. He confesses to Himmat Singh:

That is a terrible sensation ... the realization that one's life has been a total waste, a great mistake: without purpose, without results, there are many sorrows in the world, but there is nothing in the three worlds to match the sorrow of a wasted life. (140)

Devoid of Individuality

Ratan is so much devoid of his individuality that he compares himself with a blotting paper, which becomes black if the ink is black and red if red. His real nature is well summoned up in the word of Himmat Singh when he says:

You are bogus, Ratan Rathor. Bogus from top to bottom. Your work, your religion, your friendships, your honor, nothing but a pile of dung. Nothing he said, but poses, a bundle of shams. (186)

Absolute Humility and Genie Acceptance of Life?

Himmat Singh conversion may sound somewhat unnatural and rather extreme, an absolute humility and genial acceptance of life as it is an undoubtedly create an inner center of peace and serenity for the individual.

Himmat dreams of achieving material success and in the process is alienated from his own self. It takes him, his whole life to realize the futility of everything. Ratan suffers from discontent and that becomes a way of life and the most shattering thing is the breakdown of faith.

The Meaningless of Life

The problem of the meaninglessness of life is again focused on "**The Last Labyrinth**". The novel raises many pertinent questions about the meaning of life and the unresolved mysteries of God and Death. Som Bhaskar realizes that the greatest dilemma of human life is its ultimate reality-death and questions about life and death which continue to haunt him throughout his life. Som has no explanation to life's problems and he once said to Anuradha:

I will tell you what is wrong ... I am dislocated. My mind is out of focus. There is something sitting right in front of me and I cannot see it (107)

Som is urged on by a keen desire to know the meaning of life but fails to make any progress in this regard. The psychologists whom he consults fail to give a solution to his

problem, for, as one of them say to him, “psychiatry doesn’t allow certain approaches to problems like yours.”

Som’s covetous and faithless attitude towards life, compels him to enter into the unending struggle, his struggle, however, is render ‘futile’ by his nagging, enervating doubts, Som struggles hard to come to terms with life and find out its meaning, but to no avail. Som does not possess a believing mind and fails to comprehend life and its dilemma and the world remains to him a mysterious one, as pretentious and as meaningless.

Conclusion

Thus, the prominent characters in the novel, suffer from existential predicament for different reasons. Arun Joshi exposes the stretch of this sordid society, by ripping of the masks and exposing the inner core of a human being. In his search for new themes, Joshi has renowned the larger world in favour of the inner man and has engaged himself in “a search for the essence of human living”. Most of the characters of Arun Joshi’s novels totally give the impression of loneliness, separation, hypocrisy, and absence of individuality.

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