

SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN THE LITERARY WORKS OF ARUN JOSHI

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ABSTRACT

The central characters in the novels by Arun Joshi encounter diverse challenges throughout their life journeys. These challenges can stem from societal, psychological, political, cultural, spiritual, or inherent sources of pressure. These external forces hinder their ability to live as they desire, causing them to become entangled in the complexities of existence. Nevertheless, each of these characters embarks on a personal exploration to rediscover their true selves and reclaim what they've lost. This paper delves into their experiences of adversity, explores the origins of their struggles, and assesses the extent to which their endeavors to reconnect with their authentic selves prove fruitful.

Keywords: challenges, complexities, encounter, entangled, hinder, rediscover.

Arun Joshi has penned down only five novels namely *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), and *The City and the River* (1990). His impact is noteworthy due to his departure from the themes explored by those who came before him. Unlike his predecessors, who focused on addressing societal challenges faced by the average person, Joshi shifted his attention to the personal struggles of the individual. He renounced “the larger world in favour of the inner man” (Verghese 124-15). A study of his novels reveals that their central motif is invariably a crisis and a consequent quest for self. The main characters in his stories are individuals on a journey of self-discovery, navigating through the complexities of existence. Despite feeling adrift in life's intricate pathways, these protagonists actively strive to extricate themselves from turmoil and achieve a deeper understanding of their true selves.

The concept of ‘Self’ can be understood as an individual's inherent nature, an intrinsic essence they possess from birth. It signifies the unique way in which nature has shaped an individual, defining their authentic essence and intended identity. It can also refer to the spark of divinity that is inherent in every man. To know oneself as one *is*, is to know the self. Understanding the fate of this innate self in the contemporary era and the mechanisms behind its loss or displacement, prompting a need for a search, becomes crucial.

In the present day, man faces the challenge of living amidst profound stress and pressure. The devastations and destructions caused by the two world wars, the crumbling of traditional moral values, spiritual bankruptcy, impingement of other cultures on one's own culture, demands for the gratification of the lower self, urbanisation, commercialisation of life, increase in superficiality have rendered life absurd, meaningless, directionless and futile. Besides, man experiences a chasm between what he hopes and what things turn out to be; what he wants to do and what he is compelled to do instead; and what he is and what he would like to become. This has a serious denting effect on his psyche. Besides, man is alienated from his self as well as the society in which he lives. The protagonists of Arun Joshi face such problems. The

problems that they encounter are psychological, social, political, cultural or spiritual. Nevertheless, each of these characters strives to liberate themselves from the suffocating circumstances and endeavors to reclaim their true identities.

In "*The Foreigner*," the main character Sindi Oberoi grapples with a profound sense of emptiness and aimlessness in his life. He is disconnected from his familial, cultural, and social ties, constantly feeling like an outsider regardless of his location. The emotional blow of losing his parents in a plane crash when he was just four years old further accentuates his inner turmoil. His uncle, whose presence makes him feel secure and assured, also dies. The misfortunes early in his childhood shake his faith in God. Sindi's father was a Kenyan-Indian and his mother was an English woman. Besides, his childhood was spent in Kenya where his uncle lived. Sindi fails to assimilate the culture of any particular country. Devoid of love, care, security and cultural roots, Sindi grows a cleft in his personality and becomes a wandering alien. Even America and England, where he reaches for higher education later, fail to provide him any solace. Consequently, Sindi is alienated. The 'foreignness' in him prevents him from integrating himself fully with others and leads to the truncation of his self. The problem with Sindi is that his alienation is not merely geographical; it is ingrained into his self. While working in a library in Scotland, he comes to have the first knowledge of the mysteries that govern the universe: "All love -- whether of things, or persons or oneself -- was all illusion and all pain sprang from this illusion" (Joshi *The Foreigner* 145). This half-baked wisdom compounds his trouble instead of solving them. Sindi applies this lesson of detachment to his relationship with June Blyth, who loves him sincerely. Sindi turns a deaf ear to the requests of June to get married to her. Sindi's practice of detachment takes him farther from her and consequently, Sindi loses her to Babu, the son of a rich Indian businessman who comes to America for a degree. Later, the deaths of Babu in a car accident and June due to an abortion serve as pivotal moments for Sindi's realization that his concept of detachment was flawed. Initially, he believed detachment equated to inaction, but he now comprehends that it actually implies engaging in "right action" rather than evading it (p. 162). This awakening leads him to uncover his intrinsic nature, driven by a genuine desire to benefit others without selfish motives. Becoming a master of detachment, Sindi joins Mr. Khemka's struggling business and effectively rescues it from impending closure. He learns the valuable lesson that "detachment can sometimes manifest in active involvement" (p. 188). Sindi now engages in virtuous actions driven by selflessness, resulting in the revelation of his improved self through his quest.

In the second novel, "*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*," the protagonist grapples with a sense of misfitting, displacement, and a feeling of being out of place within contemporary society. He struggles to establish meaningful connections with the world around him. The emotional aridity, intellectual shallowness, and spiritual emptiness of Delhi's society stand in stark contrast to his inner yearnings. Despite familial expectations, Billy pursues a PhD in Anthropology, driven by a strong primal instinct within him. He later joins Delhi university as a lecturer in Anthropology. He selects this subject as he wants to "visit the places they describe, meet the people who live there, find out about the aboriginalness of the world (Joshi *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* 14). While doing his PhD he lives at Harlem, an area where the primitive people live. His love for the primitive is an inborn propensity. Most often he is infused with the desire to get transported to the tribal world away from the modern city

civilisation. During a visit to Bhubaneswar and Konark, when he was fourteen years of age, he felt “This is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of” (125). On another occasion, during an Odissi dance performance he is transported to the ‘other world’, being enchanted by the deep, sonorous voice of the singers, and the vivacious and sinuous flourishes of the ghungurus. Billy feels that there is an ‘other side’ as “a great force, urkraft, a ... primitive force” (23). Billy experiences great tension as he is tossed between the primitive and the civilised. The failure of his marriage with Meena Chatterjee complicates the matter as it weakens his bond with the civilised world. Billy finds that the modern civilisation fails to provide him any solace. Finally, he escapes into the land of the primitive tribals -- the saal forests of the Maikala Hills. It is here that his heart which is full of disquiet and agitation finds serenity. Billy Biswas attains a state of perfect balance and harmony with the elemental forces of nature, leading to the revelation of his authentic self. By forsaking his conventional civilized life and embracing the natural existence of primitive societies, Billy uncovers his true identity.

In Joshi’s third novel, “*The Apprentice*,” the narrative follows Ratan Rathore’s journey from a position of respect to the depths of despair, as he grapples with the quest to redeem his soul. Ratan becomes caught in a conflict between the opposing philosophies of his parents. His father, a follower of Gandhian principles, embodies ideals of idealism, patriotism, and self-sacrifice. He abandons his prosperous legal career, relinquishing his wealth to join the freedom movement. Tragically, while leading a protest against the British, he is fatally shot for defying the sergeant’s orders. Ratan’s mother, on the other hand, is pragmatic and down-to-earth in his approach. She accords the topmost priority to money. She tells Ratan the value of money thus: “It was not patriotism but money ... that brought respect and bought security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed” (Joshi *The Apprentice* 19). Ratan always wanted to “make a mark on the world, a mark as visible and as striking” (23) as his father’s. His ambition was “To be good! Respected! To be of Use!” (18).

Ratan experiences profound bewilderment as he stands at the crossroads of his life’s path. He wants to follow the footsteps of his father by joining the movement himself but the thought of his ‘uncertain future’ stares large into his face. He decides to leave for Delhi in search of a job. There he comes in contact with the hypocrisy and debauchery that rule the world. He is “examined, interviewed, interrogated and rejected” (29) again and again. The jobs go to those who are pre-selected. His father’s friends refuse to help him. Finally, with the help of his roommate he gets a temporary job in the Department for War Purchases. This position serves as a starting point for him, propelling him towards his chosen path. He makes the decision to commit to his ‘career’.

Ratan dedicates himself wholeheartedly and industriously, garnering approval from all. Concurrently, he adopts a compliant demeanor. His ascent in position and prestige is notable. In the pursuit of a stable professional future, he enters into marriage with the superintendent’s niece. Gradually, his ambition takes hold, leading him to descend into the depths of corruption. Consequently, he becomes disconnected from his genuine self. During the Indo-Chinese war, he takes a big bribe and clears some defunct war materials. As a result of his act, his closest friend, a brigadier, deserts the battlefield. Besides, Ratan thrusts his country into peril at the time of need. Ratan, without any remorse, pursues his career through “flattery and cunning” (66) and “manoeuvring and downright lying” (67). The Brigadier, just before he is court-martialed on

charges of deserting the post, commits suicide. Ratan realises that he has committed a grievous sin and that he should mend his life and redeem his soul. He also feels that his life has become 'a pile of dung' (133). He decides to expiate his sins by dusting the shoes of the devotees in front of a temple. In this manner, he endeavors to uncover his genuine, elevated moral self.

In the fourth novel, "*The Last Labyrinth*," the central character Som Bhaskar experiences a pervasive sense of lacking, robbing him of tranquility, contentment, and bliss. The novel elucidates his endeavors to confront his inner void and his journey towards self-acceptance. Som originated from a lineage of aristocracy. He becomes a millionaire industrialist at the age of 25. He was endowed with an enormous business acumen. His touch could turn mud into gold. He had a beautiful wife and two wonderful children. It is natural to think that such a person would lead a happy and contented life. But for some strange reason he leads a discontented life. Consequently, at the age of thirty-five he turns out to be a "worn out weary man incapable of spontaneous feeling" (Joshi *The Last Labyrinth* 11). Throughout the day and night he is found singing "a grey cry," (11) "a strident song," (11) "a rusty cry" (12) and above all the song that orchestrates his his discontent, "I want. I want. I want" (11). He feels dislocated and out of focus. The medicines prescribed by the doctor cannot cure him. The problem with him is that he fails to trace out the reason for his discontent. He takes to boozing and womanising but they cannot cure him. He now feels that his existence is irrelevant and meaningless. The utter sense of failure fills him with sorrow.

However, it would be unfair to solely attribute Som's condition to his own actions. There are additional factors that have contributed to shaping his current state. To a significant extent, he is a product of his era, having imbibed the prevailing skepticism towards everything. The influence of his ancestors is also palpable; his grandfather was renowned for his pursuit of pleasure, while his father was a scientist, and his mother held steadfast religious beliefs. These conflicting influences pull Som in opposing directions, causing internal turmoil.

Som's infatuation fixates on Anuradha, the beloved of a businessman named Aftab. In Aftab's mansion, they quell their physical desires. Som extends an invitation to Anuradha to join him in Mumbai and reside together. Their relationship reaches a pinnacle, but abruptly, Som suffers a severe heart attack. Astonishingly, he narrowly escapes death and recovers. Subsequently, he implores Anuradha to meet him, yet she declines to do so. Incensed by her refusal, he instructs his secretary to buy all the shares of Aftab's company. Even he himself goes to the temple of Lord Krishna at the top of a hill to get the shares. There he comes to know that a miracle had happened after his heart attack. His survival was nothing less than a miracle. At the hill he comes to a circular chamber where a constantly burning flame is worshipped by devotees as God. Other devotees experience bliss at the sight of the flame but it cannot bring any peace to Som's heart. He goes on doubting everything, even God. Gargi advises Som to have faith in God and submit himself at His feet. Som's excessive reliance on reason, intellectual pride, and his belief that science and reason could solve all his problems stand on the way of his realisation. Resolving his predicaments requires Som to exercise control over his unchecked avarice and unrestrained desires. Furthermore, he should foster qualities of forgiveness, renunciation, detachment, and adopt a non-possessive mindset.

The fifth and final novel, "*The City and The River*," departs from the previous four in that it shifts from an individual's search for self to a collective pursuit shared by an entire generation

or race, seeking a fair and dignified existence. The novel delineates the quest of a 'city' for its self in terms of freedom, survival, purification and better alternatives in the wake of the evils perpetrated by its ruler and coterie of ministers.

The city that has flourished alongside a river is under the rule of the Grand Master and his accompanying group of ministers. Within this city, various social classes inhabit distinct elevations, with the Grand Master residing at the pinnacle height. Situated at the lowest point, adjacent to the riverbank, reside the boatmen. The Grand Master struggles to understand and connect with the boatmen due to their inscrutable and unyielding nature. They are not amenable to persuasion. They live at a subsistence level and are content with only two square meals a day. They considered themselves the children of the river and announced their allegiance to the river only. The grand Master wants to be the "unquestioned lord of these Seven hills" (Joshi *The City and The River* 22). The existence of a prophecy that talks about the coming of a king fuels his ambition. In order to fulfill his ambition, the Grand Master in connivance with the Astrologer, issues a decree whereby the allegiance of the people to the Triple Way or the Way of the Three Beatitudes is made compulsory. The boatmen refuse to accept the conditions laid down in the decree. They also refuse to accept their allegiance to the Grand Master. The Era of Ultimate Greatness, the beginning of which is announced by the Grand Master, turns into an era of gloom and repression. The boatmen are arrested and subjected to untold miseries. On the other hand, the Grand Master along with his coterie remains busy in self-aggrandizement. Ultimately, a catastrophic flood engulfs the entirety of the city, erasing all traces of its existence. A parallel tale of hardship persists in the newly emerging city that takes the old city's place. The novel concludes with an open-ended narrative. The city's unceasing pursuit of self, striving for freedom, honorable existence, tranquility, and serenity, continues unabated. This ongoing endeavor will persist until a virtuous ruler emerges, capable of comprehending and addressing the people's uprising with the appropriate perspective.

Through the analysis, it becomes evident that the quest for self is a recurring theme across all five novels by Arun Joshi. In the initial three novels, the protagonists – Sindi Oberoi, Billy Biswas, and Ratan Rathore – recognize the points of their personal downfall and successfully endeavor to reclaim their authentic selves. Their quest for self is complete. In the fourth novel the protagonist, Som Bhaskar realises at the end that he needs to have faith in God to fully recover his self. In the fifth novel, the city's pursuit of self-endures, persisting until a ruler emerges who is willing to set aside personal ego and the desire for dominance, working instead for the city's improvement and welfare.

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