

QUEST FOR IDENTITY: A STUDY OF ARUN JOSHI'S *THE FOREIGNER*

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Abstract: Alienation and identity are connected to such an extent that both are inseparable. Social alienation or psychological alienation is the result of loss of identity. A man in search of his identity comes close to the society to which he belongs and ultimately finds that his search for identity is nothing but the discovery of his self. Sindi, the protagonist, recounts his life as a seeker who finds himself in a world that is devoid of meaning. In search of a meaningful existence, he roams different parts of the world and adopts different philosophies to solve his problem of existence. He wrongly construes the philosophy of detachment as inaction. Throughout the novel, he hops from one place to another to find a solution and finally learns the teaching of *The Bhagavad Gita* that detachment is not inaction but action without attachment. Thus, the present study is an attempt to analyze Arun Joshi's vision of life. He is one of the Indian novelists who have expounded on the predicament of modern man in a materialistic society. Withdrawing from the external world to explore the internal one, he explores the dark labyrinth of the human soul. He finds modern man isolated and alienated from his fellow beings. With his knowledge of Hindu philosophy, Arun Joshi attempts to provide a solution based on Lord Krishna's preaching to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Key Words: Identity, Modernity, detachment, alienation, inaction.

Modernity has a remarkable effect on the lives of every individual. It has completely changed the society. In modern society, man has become a slave, obeying orders without giving an iota of thought to his existence and identity. If development in science and technology has enriched the lifestyle of modern man, it has also impoverished him spiritually. On the one hand, modern man boasts about his success with the help of science and technology. On the other hand, he regrets leaving behind his peaceful life. Modernity has reached every corner of the world and achieved its goal by making the lives of people easier and cozy. It has given comfort to the body but snatched mental and spiritual peace. Human's values are on the verge of extinction, leading to a crisis of existence and identity. In modern society, man has failed to perceive the importance of his existence and finds his life rootless and meaningless.

Arun Joshi (1939-1993) is one of the Indian writers whose novels are based on experience. He does not merely restate it but shapes it to show the reality that lies hidden in some corner of his existence. He uses literature as an experimental tool for studying man's situation in the modern world. "My novels, says Joshi, are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of myself" (Dhawan 8). In his fiction, he deals with the problem of rootlessness, restlessness, spiritual bareness, existence, and identity. While dealing with these ontological issues, he shows the influence of western existential philosophers in delineating his characters. He declares, "I did read Camus and Sartre. I liked *The Outsider*. I might have been influenced by them. Sartre I did not understand clearly or like. As for existentialist philosophers like Kierkegaard, I have never understood anything except odd statements" (Jain 95-96). Despite his denial, there are instances throughout the book that make it read as an existential quest to find meaning in the absurdity of existence. In terms of Hindu philosophy, he has been inspired by the *Bhagavad Gita*, particularly its prime message of how to act to live a meaningful life. He believes that the

irresponsible actions of an individual have drastic effects on both others and oneself. He believes that "Hinduism is highly existentialist-oriented philosophy since it attaches so much importance to the right way to live (to exist)" (Jain 98). He finds a valueless world where men have forgotten their responsibility towards others. Chaos, confusion and anarchy have replaced the spiritual and peaceful life. He, therefore, decides to use his literary works to reform society. He not only enumerates the flaws of society but also gives a solution to cope with the problem.

The Foreigner is the study of an individual who moves across the globe in search of identity. After coming into existence, he finds himself deprived of all kinds of values and roles that a child receives first from his parents. He lost his parents in his childhood and was brought up by his uncle. He does not associate any kind of relationship with them, as he says, "for the hundredth time I related the story of those strangers whose only reality was a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs" (12). After the death of his parents, his uncle gives him a feeling of anchor, but he too dies very soon. A parentless childhood gives birth to emotional insecurity and makes him an alien and foreigner to the society in which he was born. "The novel is about an individual's loneliness and feeling of anguish in the wake of his estrangement from his environment, tradition and from his true self" (Ghosh 38). In his quest for identity, he moves from Kenya to London, from London to Boston, and from Boston to Delhi but the feeling of anchorless life remains the same everywhere, as he says, "And yet all the shores are alien when you do not belong anywhere" (80).

He does not belong to anywhere as he does not have his identity. In order to create his own identity, he has to transcend inherited values. At one of the International Students Association parties, he feels as if he is sitting in his tomb. His behaviour indicates that he has failed to identify himself with them. "Rather than remaining immersed in the group identity, the identity-forming individual must separate from the man and make a stand as a unique person" (Bilsker 185-86). Sindi moves ahead from *thrownness* to identity formation. Heidegger's concept of *thrownness* is the state of coming into existence of the individual. After coming into existence, an individual can either lead an unauthentic life given by the mass culture or form his own identity and lead an authentic life. So, in search of his identity, Sindi withdraws from the world then returns after moving from one place to another.

Intending to do engineering, he joined London University. Soon he finds that classroom lectures are not providing a solution to his problem, and he wants to have a different kind of adventure to sort out his identity problem. He says, "I wanted to know the meaning of my life. And all my classrooms didn't tell me a thing about it" (142). He, therefore, joins the Soho Club as a dishwasher and meets with a minor artist, Anna. They get intimate and have a coitus relationship. He leaves her when he comes into contact with Kathy, who has separated from her husband. This time, Kathy leaves him because she thinks that marriage is a sacred bond and returns to her husband. Meanwhile, Sindi moves to Scotland and meets a Catholic priest who teaches him the lesson of detachment, which he wrongly construes as inaction. Following his illusion of detachment, he avers to June that "love begot greed and attachment, and it led to possession" (145).

In Boston, he comes into contact with June Blyth and Babu Rao Khemka. They become his intimate friends, but his illusion of detachment takes the lives of his two dear ones. He meets June at an International Ball Association and develops an intimate relationship with her. She wants to get married, but Sindi refuses, as he does not want to take any kind of responsibility. He fails to return June's genuine and pure love since he thinks that no relationship lasts long. The lesson he has learned from his previous mistakes weighs heavily on him, and it has the effect of paralyzing his capacity to make new commitments in his life.

In search of his identity, Sindi becomes a pleasure seeker. He develops illicit relationships with Anna, Kathy, Judy, Christine, and June but avoids accountability under the guise of detachment. When

June expresses interest in marriage, he directly rebuffs her. She asks, "Why don't we get married" (90)? He wants to keep himself free from any kind of commitment and attachment. He, therefore, asserts that he is "afraid of possessing anybody and... afraid of being possessed, and marriage meant both" (91). On another occasion, he tells June that "marriage was more often a lust for possession than anything else. People got married just as they bought new cars. And then they gobbled each other up" (60). Nothing seems to him real or permanent. Befuddled by the fleeting nature of time and the lack of stability in every sphere of life, Sindi assumes that love, like everything in this world, is just a fleeting thing. He avers:

You can love without attachment, without desire. You can love without attachment to the objects of your love. You can love without fooling yourself that the things you love are indispensable either to you or to the world. Love is real only when you know that what you love must one day die. (145).

In spite of his detachment, his attitude shows that he is making every attempt to possess June. He wants to live with her but fears of getting involved. Whenever June expresses her desire for marriage, he dodges. His hypocrisy become evident when he shows restlessness after hearing the news that June has decided to marry with Babu. He says, "June would not leave me, not for Babu anyway. What would she find in Babu that I didn't have?" (102). It seems that he construes detachment with inaction.

June is a humane and sacrificial girl. She is extrovert and feels pain when she finds anyone in trouble. She always wants to make herself useful to others. As Sindi says, "June was one of those rare persons who have a capacity to forget themselves in somebody's trouble" (97). Sindi's non-involvement brings her near to Babu. Therefore, when she finds Babu in trouble, she gets close to him. Babu wants to marry her, but when he comes to know that he has been sleeping with Sindi, he commits suicide. Sindi decides to marry her when he learns that June is carrying Babu's child. He airdashes to Boston from New York, but after reaching he finds her dead during an abortion. He realizes his flaw after the death of June. The horrible experience of the death of June and Babu breaks him from within, and he begins to see the fallacy in his philosophy of detachment. He confesses: "Detachment at that time had meant inaction. Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachment consisted of right action and not escapes from it" (160). Now he understands that the real cause of his alienation and foreignness is nothing but his erroneous interpretation of detachment.

Sindi used to think that the past could not be changed. Despite his recognition of the past's meaninglessness, he feels compelled to redeem it by productive activities. He is now a disillusioned, disheartened but wise man who has learned the meaning of detachment. To do something meaningful which could make his life meaningful for others, he joins the factory of Mr. Khemka. His obsession with the self begins to shatter when he moves in the right direction. For the first time, he is confronted with a reality that he had previously disregarded due to his preoccupation with his suffering and detached attitude. Everything that seemed to him meaningful in his previous life has now appeared as nothing more than a transitory illusion. The illusion of detachment dissolved and gave birth to love and empathy for the poor. His visit to Muthu's family shatters him from within to the extent that he gets ready to accept the demands of the factory workers. He took over the responsibility of the factory when Mr. Khemka was imprisoned. He convinced himself to do it for the most altruistic reasons. He asserts, "I felt as if I had been dropped on a sinking ship and charged with the impossible task of taking it ashore" (239-40). After being lost for a long time, he finally comes to the conclusion that "detachment consisted in getting involved with the world" (239).

He learns the true meaning of detachment from Muthu, and with the assistance of the workers, he makes significant strides in the company's prosperity. Sindi, a man of non-involvement, ultimately gets interested in the business and develops a feeling of belonging. Aware of his new direction in life and thinking, Sindi changes his name from "Surinder" to "Surrender" and believes that the future will provide

him with a "chance to redeem the past" (234). Sindi seems to have realized that "activity is better than idleness" and that one should learn to be detached:

Therefore, without attachment, perform always the work that has to be done, for man attains to the highest by doing work without attachment (Radhakrishnan 138).

The Foreigner contains powerful affirmations such as proper detachment and purposeful action, combating evil and corruption, humanitarianism and love of the people, a search for peace, fulfilment, and redemption within one's cultural boundaries. Sindi realizes fallacy in his philosophy of detachment after witnessing the miseries of the factory workers. In this way, he finds his identity as a responsible individual. He develops this new orientation of values through relentless struggle and excruciating pain. His new orientation in life is not forced upon him, but he chooses it deliberately and with full awareness of the repercussions. The foundation of this transition is his companionship with the suffering of humanity and his readiness to exist as a responsible being. Furthermore, the novel records the spiritual journey of an individual who withdraws from the world and, after realization of the true meaning of detachment, returns to it and takes meaningful participation in it.

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