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The False Detachment of Sindi Oberoi in Arun Joshi's "The Foreigner"

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Abstract:

Arun Joshi is known as one of the leading figures among post-independence Indo-Anglian novelists. He has written 5 novels and for one of his novels he has won Sahitya Academy Award in 1983. Joshi takes his themes from the contemporary social, political, economical, historical and psychological problems facing the people. The defeated, exploited underdogs also find a place in his fiction. His novel "The Foreigner" presents the realistic philosophy of Karmyoga. The novel gives a message to the younger generation of his time that it is not possible to escape from the truth or hard realities of life. To confront them is the only solution. In this novel Joshi's purpose, has been to portray not only the positive aspects of India but negative aspects also. Joshi main concern has been the problems resulting from the confrontation of two cultures and even different ways of life, different social, economic and ethical value systems even within one culture. This novel may be interpreted as a satire on man's exploitation by man in free India; on the corruption of our society; population explosion and increasing poverty and hunger. Joshi got his education in the west but he understands well the social fabric of the society of free India. He has never lost his cultural and spiritual roots.

Keywords: *Karmyoga, sahitya academy award, underdogs, culture, exploitation, satire*

1. Introduction

The novel in any other Indian language is not much older than in Indian English. Derozio is the first Indian poet to write poetry in English and he is followed by Kashiprasad Ghosh and Toru Dutt, Bankim Chandra is the first Indian to write a novel named "**Rajmohan's Wife**" in English in the 19th century. In the beginning the Indian English writers faced many problems such as model, traditions, idioms, myths and even readership. Only a few Indians knew English at that time and the Englishmen in India, yet they are handfull and looked down upon Indians and knew little of India. Towards the last phase of the 19th century, when universities were opened, journalism started getting popularity. Thinkers started to communicate their ideas in the language of the rulers. With the passage of time, the English language has been well absorbed by the Indians and they started to translate petitions, records and even Sanskrit texts in to English. The British rulers might not have ever thought that one day Indian writers would not only excel them in the use of English language but one day would win the prestigious award like Nobel and Booker and winning international recognition and acclaim.

Arun Joshi is one of those prominent writers who have taken up the post-independence socio-political, economical, and philosophical climate of India as their subject matter. How does he look upon India, it is presented through his novels. His fiction shows the encounter of the two cultures. Like Kamla Markandaya, he introduces Western characters in his novels that try to understand Indian way of life but generally they fail.

- "Existentialism is a new name for an ancient method. The Upanishads and Buddhism insist on knowledge of the self: atmanam viddih. They tell us that a man is victim of ignorance, avidya which breeds selfishness. So long, as we live own unregenerate lives in the world of time, governed by Karman or necessity, we are at the mercy of time. The feeling of distress is universal. A sense of blankness overtakes the seeking spirit. Which is not the final resting place? He has to be transcended. Man can free himself from sorrow and suffering by becoming aware of the eternal. This awareness is called Jnana or bodhi."¹

The Foreigner, which presents the dilemma of Western educated Indians in the post-independence era, is largely an autobiographical novel. He admits openly to Purabi Banerjee about The Foreigner-

- "It is largely autobiographical. I am somewhat alienated man myself...some parts of The Foreigner, my first book, were written when I was a student in America. I gave it up then and completed it later in 1966."²

The novel presents the danger of cultural uprootedness in the wake of western influence and education. The protagonist of the novel, Sindi Oberoi is the perfect example of this. He is a product of the crossroads of east and west. The novel depicts how Sindi is suffering to discover the true meaning of his life and has adopted the theory of false detachment. It depicts the suffering of an individual, like Arjuna, from ignorance to reality-

- “Joshi is deeply influenced by the Bhagwat Gita in the formulation and resolution of this problem, so much so that one may read the novel, not without justification, as an illustration of the Karmic principle propounded by Lord Krishna in chapter II and III of the Gita.”³

We find in the novel religious, social and economic issues at large. In the form of Sindi, Arun Joshi depicts the cultural encounter and the result of rootlessness, alienation and depression of Indian youth. In this novel Sindi is a cultural orphan, a man who does not belong to anywhere. He is born in Kenya of Indian father and English mother. Both of them die in air crash near when he was just a child of four years old. At that time, he was so younger that he is unable to recollect their faces now. It seems that they never existed for him. He lost his parents at the time when he needed them most for the growth of his personality. This factor shows the importance of parents in a child's life. In India, a lot of emphasis is laid on the parentage and look after of the child. Sindi became orphan such an early age that it is hard to accept him his parents' death as a tragedy-

- “I said they had been killed in air crash near Cairo and that I had been brought up by my uncle in Kenya. I wanted to add that I didn't particularly miss them, that it was too long for me to remember.”⁴

This orphaned childhood generates in him a kind of insecurity that we can find in his entire attitude to life. His ancestry is Indian but he grows up in America. It is hard for him to accept east and west does not suit him and isolates him from his surroundings. He is brought up by his uncle in Kenya but the little he has learnt from his uncle and aunt, is not enough to quench his thirst to know about India and establish his identity. After his uncle's death, he thinks himself insecure and without an anchor-

- “I hadn't felt like that my uncle was living. It wasn't not that I loved him very much or anything – as a matter of fact we rarely exchanged letters – but the thought that he moved about in that small house on the outskirts of Nairobi gave me a feeling of having an anchor. After his death, the security was destroyed.”⁵

After his uncle's death, Sindi leaves for England where he joins London University to study Engineering. But his restlessness soon makes him tired of the classroom lectures. He was bothered by some different kind of questions and his classroom did not tell him even a thing about it. To know the meaning of life he starts an evening job at Soho bar where he comes in to contact of minor artist and divorcee named Anna, thirty-five years old, the first woman in Sindi's life. Sindi is impressed by her learning and often has discussed with him the meaning of life and death. This relation continues for six months. She loves him intensely and unselfishly and her sadness attracts him. Through this relation Arun Joshi presents how in western countries pre-marital and extra marital relationships are taken as a routine. But in India such relations are not accepted in the society. In one of Anna's parties he meets with Kathy an English housewife who is hungry for adulterous love. He gets deeply involved with Kathy but this relation doesn't go so long and ends in few weeks. The burden of these broken relations disturbs him deeply because these are not the relations of heart but are for temporary pleasures. In his search of truth and purpose of life, he becomes befriended with a Roman Catholic priest in Scotland. He spends much of his time in discussing with him about religion, God and mysticism. His long discussions with priest seem to clear up his doubts and problems. One morning at the time of sun rising Sindi reaches at the top of the hill and sits on the rock-

- “Suddenly I felt a great lightening, as if someone had lifted a burden from my chest and it all came through in a flash. All love – whether of things or persons or oneself – was an illusion and all pain sprang from this illusion. Love begot greed and attachment, and it led to possession.”⁶

But he is unable to understand the real meaning of detachment. He takes it for non-involvement and inaction and this way he tries to escape from responsibility. He wants to enjoy pleasure, gain and victory but tries to avoid pain, loss and defeat. In fact, his detachment is delusion. He becomes a person of dual personality. He is spiritually detached from the world, but engrossed with himself. Sindi goes to Boston to study and there he meets a beautiful, frank American girl at foreign student's party and is attracted towards her. She is strongly fascinated by Indian mysticism and helps people to know others' cultures. In one of such meetings she meets Sindi and comes very close to him. Unlike Sindi she suffers no illusion either about herself or the world around her. Her only purpose is to share the burden of the sorrows of others. Sindi says about her-

- “June was one of those rare persons who have a capacity to forget themselves in somebody's trouble...whenever she saw somebody in pain she went straight out to pet him rather than analysing it a million times like the rest of us.”⁷

June sincerely loves Sindi and wants to be helpful for him. With her empathy, she comes to know that Sindi is not at peace with himself and is extremely lonely. She wants to marry him and have children by him. She thinks that getting married and having children is the right way to contribute in the society. On the other hand, Sindi loves June but doesn't want the responsibility of this relation on himself. Sindi's behaviour appears to be false and detachment is just a mask. Dr Radhakrishnan says-

- “He who restrains his organs of action but continues in his mind to brood over the objects of sense, whose nature is deluded is said to be hypocrite (a man of false conduct).”⁸

His relationship with June is the essence of his life but he spoils it primarily because of the fear of engulfment. He loves her deeply in truth but withdraws from her. He is threatened with the fear of losing his identity by his contact with others. In fact, he just learns half lesson of the Bhagwat Gita and misconstrues it for selfish purposes. S. Rangachari aptly remarks-

- “Detachment which he clings to with perverse obstinacy, misconstruing the lofty concept in a manner suiting his awareness is a euphemism for self-isolation, callous indifference, gross selfishness and inhuman passivity.”⁹

When Sindi clearly refuses June, she is shocked but being an American girl takes it casually.

One more character Babu Rao Khamka who is fascinated by the glamorous life and illusions of America like most of the Indians. Babu is a typical son of an educated and rich Indian family. His father is rich and owns a factory at Delhi. Babu is the second version of Sindi, a bit more immature and innocent. Babu is foolish, while Sindi is unwise. Through Babu, Arun Joshi shows the harmful effect of too much control upon children in India. Babu represents all those Indian youths who go to America for education but are lost

in the freedom and liberty of American life. June points out to Babu that this American society has its own weaknesses which are not visible to a new comer. But Babu says enthusiastically-

- “Indians are so underdeveloped as compared to them. Something I wish I had been born in America. Not that I have anything against India, but there is nothing to beat America.”¹⁰

Babu falls in love with June who also responds him as Sindi has refused her proposal of marriage. Babu loves June with a dog like devotion and gets relief when Sindi tells him that he and June are just good friends and he has no plan to marry her. Babu lives in a strange world of dreams so much that the hard facts of life prove strange for him. Babu is afraid of his father who is dominating and possessive like any other Indian father. Mr. Khamka loves his son as he loves a factory. Babu is a pawn in his hand and he has no choice of his own. He wants Babu to marry a fat Marwari girl for dowry and his plan to marry June doesn't suit him. As Babu gets involved with June, he fails miserably in his studies. Even he gets serious warning from the university authorities. Here Arun Joshi points out that here in India one can study at the end of the session and get through but in America and other foreign countries one is required to study constantly. Babu finds an emotional anchor in June's love, but he is conscious about the attitude of his father about love and marriage. He tells Sindi that his father would be very angry if he finds that his son is running about a strange girl. When June asks Babu to marry her, at first, he expresses his helplessness as he is the only son of his family and his father will be very angry if he married in America. He tells June that his father is not terrible but he is quite orthodox. Babu informs his sister Sheila about his continues bad results in study through letters. He fails all his exams in M.I.T. and is removed from it. He then applies to plenty of colleges but his constant failure sends him out of the colleges. Shankar Kumar comments:

- “He was never serious with his studies; and incidentally he compared the American system of education with that of Indian. In India, he could be serious at the time of the end-of-the term examinations and pass it, whereas in America he had to be serious from the beginning as teaching and testing went together.”¹¹

Sindi on the other hand, throws his mask of detachment at the wrong moment. He thinks that June would not leave him. But she refuses to see him after being engaged with Babu. But when her relations with Babu reach at the verge of shattered she asks help from Sindi. Now his mask completely falls off and the lustful beast inside him jubilates at this victory over Babu. He has latent desire to retrieve June from Babu and this brings damage in to the life of two persons, he loves most. A quarrel takes place between June and Babu and amid of the quarrel she admits that she has been sleeping with Sindi for a year. It was impossible for Babu to bear his future wife's relation with other man. He drives off car madly and dies in a car wreck. The false detachment of Sindi drives Babu to death. He thinks himself responsible for this tragedy and moves ahead in the quest of a new place free from the memories of his past and he leaves America and comes to India. When Sindi comes to India, he feels equally suffocated by the show and decorum of the upper-class society in India. His first experience in India is not much different from those in the west. In India, he reviews his entire life and vision in the light of newly achieved wisdom particularly about marriage. Marriage is a matter of family reputation in India. When Mr Khamka comes to know from Sheila about Babu's engagement with June, he is not only furious but cannot sleep for two days. He sends Babu a cable threatening him to cut off from his property if he marries her.

Sindi is bewildered when he visits first time Mr Khamka's mansion and looks at the richness of his drawing room. In contrast to these lavish mansions of these wealthy people, there are the slums of the poor section of the society. They are living a very miserable life. Sindi sees their women in torn clothes, naked children are rolling in the mud and many people are quarrelling over small bits of tin. The mode of life and set of values which Khamka and his friends follow make Sindi sick. Mr Khamka lives like “Modern Maharaja”, who manufactures electronic kettles. He has three houses in Delhi and a villa in Mussoorie and earns thirty thousand rupees per day. Quite ironically the daily wage earners of his factory get only three rupees per day. There is a big gap between the employer and the employee. In the manner of the shrewd capitalist, Khamka says that lower class should not be trusted. Industrialisation seems to be a curse for the society. Money is the highest of all values in the modern society. Wealth is accumulated in the hands of a few people who exploit masses and reduce them to poverty and servitude. Mr Ghosh, the income tax officer, when he visits Khamka's office talks about the changing face of India that has been going on the road of progress;

- “India is working towards a new age... it is only people like you Mr Khamka who are holding back the revolution.”¹²

Mr Khamka is arrested for swindling in his accounts and his business is going to be bought by other businessmen. In that case despite being an honest worker Muthu has to lose his job for no fault of him. Before going to Bombay, Sindi receives a letter from Muthu requesting to meet him and this meeting changes his entire attitude. Muthu lives in a dirty locality near the western edge of the city and where even scavengers are not covered. No municipal truck comes there and naked and semi naked children are sitting on the heaps of garbage for the call of nature. This is the real picture of the Indian poor society living in Delhi and other metropolitan cities.

- “Muthu struggles not only for his livelihood but also for his children and for his brother's children. His fatherhood is more intense and wide.”¹³

With Muthu, and his problems, Sindi has no desire of getting involved but Muthu clears away all his confusion by saying that sometimes detachment actually lies in getting involved. Tapan Kumar Ghosh remarks aptly-

- “Like a wise sage, Muthu, who knows that due to Maya or illusion people mistake the action of their sense for their own actions, teaches Sindi this final lesson. But this knowledge is not thrust upon him. Nor is it something superficially grafted on the usual stuff of existential literature... It is presented convincingly in fictional terms.”¹⁴

After meeting Muthu, Sindi turns to his duty not with a selfish mind but with the knowledge of the self. His illusions are shattered and doubts resolved. He gives all his evasions and pretensions and commits himself whole-heartedly to a cause. For the first in his life, he is doing something selflessly. He feels a new strength to go through the difficult task ahead. Now he is not concerned about the fruits of his doings. The novel ends on an affirmative note, transmitting it into a positive vision. It can be safely concluded that Arun Joshi

rejects the American way of life and the ignorable Indian approach as symbolised by Babu. Joshi suggests that there is always a way out of mercy for a wise man who is ready to learn and know. This is a complete Indian vision.

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