

Existentialistic Dilemma And Ethical Resolution: Arun Joshi's The Apprentice



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ABSTRACT

Existentialism is the philosophy of man. It lays emphasis on the understanding of the rationale behind the human existence in this absurd, mad and bad world. Existence takes precedence over essence in this philosophy. The issues of human freedom and choice form the core of existentialism. Arun Joshi's novel, The Apprentice, highlights the basic tenets of the existentialist thought, but also suggests that human life can acquire meaning through humility, selflessness and penitence for the wrong actions. The journey of the hero's life in the present novel amply justifies it.

Key Words: Existentialism, meaninglessness, despair, anguish, freedom, choice, humility, penance, integrity.

Existentialism can, in general, be comprehended as a philosophical doctrine centring on the apprehension of the purpose and meaning of individual existence in a complex, irrational and inscrutable universe. Existential philosophy is "an orientation towards understanding the fundamental questions related to leading a meaningful life in the midst of prevailing meaninglessness, despair, anguish and loss of faith" (Rathi and Yadav 61). Existentialism argues that the universe is meaningless and, as a result thereof, "all choice is without reason yet, paradoxically, that the individual is the product of the choices he makes" (Lemon 119). As a form of literary criticism, existentialism attempts to interpret literary works, highlighting the endeavour "to define meaning and identity in the face of alienation and isolation" (<http://classiclit.about.com>). Existentialism in literature is a trend which focuses on individual existence, freedom and choice. Out of all these, the issue of choice emerges as a major theme in all existentialist writing. From the existentialist view-point, human life is absurd and the individual is forlorn and abandoned in the universe to look after himself without any external or divine help. Human freedom constitutes the only moral basis validating existence, and that only a subjective choice justifies the values anyone chooses to adopt.

In the light of the observations above, Arun Joshi's third novel, *The Apprentice* (1974) deals with an existentialist theme since the hero in the novel makes the choice of a career of corruption and a life of debasement, and consequently, faces the dilemma of losing his soul, which, however, he retrieves through honesty, humility and penance, and thus, reclaims his selfhood by resorting to the ethical means.

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Ratan Rathor, a man of forties, works as a civil servant. He lives with his wife and a daughter, but every morn-

ing before leaving for the office, he goes to a temple and wipes the shoes of devotees within, without entering the temple. K.R.S. Iyengar is of the view: "The story is slowly and compulsively unfolded in the classic 'Ancient Mariner' fashion in spasmodic bouts of confessional reminiscence, ..." (747). Rathor, who is "both hero and the anti-hero of the novel, probes deeper into his inner self and exposes his treachery, pettiness, chicken-heartedness and the degeneration of his own" (Sharma 57).

Early in his life, he, the only son of a freedom fighter, learns that his father's sacrifice for the country has been of no use. The martyr father leaves behind his family in a very poor condition. People forget him within a year. While seeking a job for himself, Ratan is humiliated by being "examined, interviewed, interrogated, and rejected" (Joshi *Apprentice* 29). He narrowly escapes the starvation death through the generosity of his roommates. A stenographer helps him to find a job as a temporary clerk in the department for war purchases. This clerical job transforms him "at the age of twenty-one, a hypocrite and a liar; in short a sham. ... From morning till night I told more lies than truths. I had become a master faker" (27).

Ratan has a powerful instinct for survival. According to him, some people live through "defiance", while others, "through obedience, by becoming servants to the powers of the world" (23). In order to succeed in life, Ratan chooses the latter way. At times, he experiences qualms of conscience and wants to retain his individuality, too, but, for the sake of promoting his career and amassing money, he gets entangled in bureaucratic and political corruption. Consequently, he loses his personality and identity. "His inside gets hollow and moth eaten" (Mathur 140). He becomes so much ambitious that he does not hesitate in betraying his colleagues. Siddhartha Sharma rightly asserts:

"Gandhian purity of 'means' which his selfless and patriotic father believed in, was replaced by the Machiavellian dedication to the end" (62). Ratan becomes altogether emotionally sterile. The higher he grows, the more his character sinks. The novelist himself declares in an interview that "individual actions have effects on others and oneself. So one cannot afford to continue with an irresponsible existence but has to commit oneself at some point" (Bannerjee 4). Ratan's father, too, had been of the opinion that whatever you do in life touches someone somewhere.

Ratan Rathor shockingly realizes that "flattery and cunning" (66) are the tools for success in this hypocritical world. Hence, he marries his boss' niece only to get confirmation in his job and later on, he shows his servitude to his superiors for promotion as assistant and finally, to become an officer in his department. He starts accepting bribes and grows rich. Ironically, the more he amasses money, the more his greed increases. He lets himself become "a whore" (47) for attaining power and position. However, despite owning every material possession he is very much dissatisfied with life. For him life seems to be a sum of algebra, where X is always missing. Gradually, he realizes that "Nothing is more deceptive than men's ideas about getting ahead" (50). He becomes out and out a hypocrite. He keeps sinking into the dark pit of corruption, exploitation and bourgeois filth, yet in his self-deception, he imagines himself untarnished.

Later on, he confesses: "We sink and we think we are swimming" (50). He loses all his humanity, particularly, when he accepts a big bribe before the war starts and allows some sub-standard material to be purchased for the army. As a result thereof, Brigadier, his close friend, has to desert the post on the war-front, for which he is later court martialled. The officer is not able to face this humiliation and commits suicide. This incident keeps haunting Ratan like a dead albatross all his life. Prosperity demands a toll of humanity, which Rathor freely allows. At this juncture of life, he feels lost and lonely: "I was, I now knew, alone" (110). He loses his conscience and so, he is unable to undertake an honest self-introspection. He fails to identify the motive behind his immoral act. His material prosperity takes the toll of his mental and spiritual poise. He is also alienated from his wife who is there in his life only to satisfy his sexual urge, not to share or console. He seeks "solace from the annals of corruption" (108). He tells the young listener that he took bribe just because everyone was doing the same.

In the first instance, Ratan feels diffident while taking bribe and accepts the offer with a feeling of guilt and wrong-doing. He faces an acute mental trauma as

he confesses: "I felt choked, oppressed, rebellious but tied up totally in knots" (63). This conflict of the protagonist provides an existential dimension to the novel and renders the hero a spineless and characterless person. Ratan is initially a coward and a slave to his circumstances: "The wide world took me in its wake, overwhelmed me, smothered me" (62). Thus, he is finally responsible for his misdeeds since he betrays his conscience and loses his true identity as a man. R.J. Das remarks that "the act of treachery inflicts an irreparable injury upon the moral nature of man, and that a guilty Ratan lives inescapably in the presence of his conscience. He too realizes... that all a man can betray is his conscience." (43) This self-betrayal generates in Ratan a feeling of being a non-entity. He says: "... I was a nobody. A NOBODY. Deep down I was convinced that I had lost significance: As an official; as a citizen; as a man" (70). Joshi presents Ratan as a modern man, at once everybody and "nobody". The protagonist wants to know what he really is, if not a "master-faker". "He was not himself but simply a cipher in the mass existence of the crowd, a cog in the social mechanism" (Ghosh 106). Himmat Singh tells Ratan that he is a fool who follows the rules "not written by God but by a silly society that would do anything for money" (72). Ratan feels ashamed and embarrassed that he is not able to live up to his father's image. He is mentally anguished and is not able to determine the purpose of his life. In his confusion he fails to distinguish between the good and the evil and wants to know: "What had I done, what had I done which I should not have done? What was right? What was wrong? What was the measure for doing things or not doing them?" (69) When Ratan decides to go to Himmat Singh, the person who bribed him at the instance of the higher authorities, to avenge his friend's death, he suddenly realizes the absurdity of it all and says:

That is a terrible sensation, my friend - may my God preserve you from it -- the realization that one's life has been a total waste, a great mistake; without purpose, without results. (135)

With the passage of time, Ratan's restlessness, loneliness and dilemma keep growing. In order to overcome his mental disturbance, he visits a temple, but he is disillusioned even there since the Pujari offers him bribe for a recommendation. Ratan realizes that corruption prevails even in the sphere of religion. Hence, religious faith, too, cannot sustain and save an individual. He wants to know if "Karma" is everything that matters, then why man should care for God. According to Hari Mohan Prasad, Ratan wants to know, if consequences of an action appear in this very life or not. Since man has not seen

God, and He does not seem to be bothered, and has left man to chalk out his own destiny on the basis of his actions, the important thing is the experience in this very life. Who knows about life here after?" (80)

After the death of his friend, the Brigadier, he gets totally shattered. The Superintendent of Police detects his involvement in the supply of sub-standard war-material to the army and he is thrown behind the bars. With the help of the Secretary and the Minister who were already involved in the same crime, he gets released from jail. However, his guilt always haunts him: "Was I the murderer, they said I was?" (106) Consolation of being let off turns out to be futile since he considers himself responsible for the death of the Brigadier. Ratan holds Himmat Singh responsible for his degeneration, but in his dramatic encounter with the Sheikh, the latter person discloses that the whole idea of clearing the substandard consignment had originated with the Minister and the Secretary, and that they had picked Ratan as a pawn because he was one of the "Spineless flunkies" (131). Himmat Singh remarks about Ratan's character: "You are bogus, Ratan Rathor. ...Bogus from top to bottom" (131). Ratan now realizes that the actual villain lies within his own self. It is Himmat Singh, the Sheikh, who brings Ratan face to face with the reality of his debasement and also makes him realize that most of his life has been merely "a heap of slush to be pondered over" (81). Goaded by his conscience, he makes a commitment to himself: "I shall be good. I shall not be greedy. I shall not be afraid. I shall be decent" (100). However, when the moment of the confession of his crime approaches, he becomes a coward, forgets his commitment and retraces his steps

from making confession and from availing of the golden chance to reclaim his true self - his very authenticity as a human being and his deliverance from sin. Summoned to the police station to confess his guilt, he experiences a great internal conflict between his heart and mind: "...what good would the confession do? The men who have died have died. And even if it were to do good, why should I go and confess?" (107) He spends many sleepless nights. He tries to pray, but fails. The novelist very graphically describes the internal turmoil of Ratan Rathor: "I did not actually pray. I did not know who was to be prayed to and how" (100). Henceforth, Ratan wants to change. He feels repentant for his evil deeds. For the first time, he does not bother for himself and tries to feel concerned for others. He feels exhausted because his soul always reprimands him for his nefarious deed of recommending the purchase of sub-standard war-material. His sense of sorrow, humiliation and guilt give him a desperate courage so as to undertake the arduous apprenticeship in the world: he wipes the shoes of the congregation with humility, performs his official duties honestly and leads his life as a man of integrity.

The novel ends on a note of affirmation, with Ratan's rekindled faith in the ethical values. The novelist makes his readers understand that the self-realization by the individual is possible only when he has integrity. Ratan lost his soul by practicing dishonesty and suffered the agony of loss. His final decision to reclaim his lost selfhood through an act of penitence reveals his deeper quest to realize and prize his integrity.

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