

Growth, Quest and Self-realization of The Hero: A Critique of Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice*



* Jyoti Sorout

* Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra (Haryana)

ABSTRACT

Joshi's novel, The Apprentice, deals with an individual's growth, maturity and quest for meaning of life. Narrated in the autobiographical mode, the novel not only explores the spiritual crisis of the hero enmeshed in the corruption and moral decay of the materialistic world, but also suggests in a subtle manner the potential way of the resolution of such a crisis. The novelist gives the message that humility, honesty and selfless service of others are the virtues which pave the way for self-realization. Ratan Rathor's debasement and the subsequent penitence amply illustrate it.

Key Words: Alienation, Corruption, transformation, selflessness, penance.

The Apprentice (1974), Arun Joshi's third novel, undertakes an exploration of "that mysterious underworld which is the human soul" (Mathai 8). About the novel, it has rightly been observed: "Crisis in the soul of an individual, who is entangled in the mess of contemporary life with its confusion of values and moral anarchy and untiring quest for a remedy lie at the core of Arun Joshi's exploration of human reality in *The Apprentice*" (Ghosh 90). Studied in the light of this observation, the novel is concerned with the plight of the contemporary man who is "sailing about in a confused society without norms, without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose" (Mathur 142). Narrated by the central character, Ratan Rathor, the story exposes the sordid corruption and the tyranny of bureaucratic organization in modern society. In this sense, the novel is "both a social document and a threnody of a tormented soul" (Prasad 65). About the hero of the novel, Prof. R.K. Srivastava opines:

He dreams of achieving material success and in the process is alienated from his own self. It takes him whole life to realize the futility of everything. He experiences the pangs of civilization which is full of lying, hypocrisy, bribery, graft, drunkenness and womanizing. (319)

Alienated from himself and also from the society, the hero grows into an individual who feels guilty and ashamed: "... here I am, a middle aged man without shame or honour" (Joshi *Apprentice* 142). Haunted by a sense of guilt and shame, he tries his best to gain his lost innocence and honour. The novel shows the suffering of modern man groping in the darkness of a confused society that is without direction and without even, perhaps, a purpose. Nevertheless, Arun Joshi believes that in order to have spiritual transformation and purification, man should do selfless service even

through suffering and sacrifice. By his act of penance, Ratan seeks to acquire humility. He sincerely wishes to make good of his lost soul. His intention is very noble in this respect: "I would be happy if I could do what I do as best as I can. Without vanity and without expectations and also without cleverness ... Remember ... whatever you do touches someone somewhere." (143) Thus, Ratan Rathor is suggesting a means of redemption not only for his own self, but also for the entire mankind. By acting with humility, with selflessness and with purity of heart, any human being will be able to live life harmoniously and truly. By confessing his crimes to the young listener, Ratan kills his ego and thus overcomes his alienation and re-asserts his selfhood: his spiritual quest for his distinct identity as an individual of integrity is finally over. The novel ends on a note of affirmation, with Ratan's rekindled faith in the humanistic values. The novelist makes his readers understand that the self-realization by a man is possible only when he has integrity of character. Ratan's vital decision to regain his identity as an individual through an act of penitence reveals his deeper quest to realize this integrity.

At a different level, Arun Joshi also seeks to determine the cause of Ratan's alienation and inner vacuity in the coercive nature of modern society which shatters his idealism and renders him corrupt and hypocritical. The novelist makes Ratan to explore his identity and to satisfy his quest for fulfilment in life by serving others. . It is a self-less involvement - to be good, to be useful, to be honest to others. Towards the end of the novel, the hero emerges as an altogether transformed man. His resolution to disclaim his past life of debasement and to start afresh shows evidently the urge for regaining his selfhood, mortgaged to materialism. Joshi here presents the universal idea that repentance is the

key to redemption and to the reassertion of one's identity.

II

Ratan Rathor, "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) A civil servant in his forties, Rathor lives with his wife and a daughter. Before leaving for his office, he visits a temple every morning and sitting outside, cleans the shoes of the devotees. He is the only son of a freedom fighter who had been martyred during the Freedom Movement. Early in his life, he learns that his father's sacrifice for the country has been of no use. People forget him within a year. Ratan is humiliated by being "examined, interviewed, interrogated, and rejected" (29), while seeking a job for himself. He almost dies of starvation but for the generosity of his roommates. A stenographer helps him to find a job as a temporary clerk in the department for war purchases. Initially, he maintains the honour and integrity of his character. He works hard, "harder than almost anybody in the department except the superintendent himself" (35), since he wants to save his job. He is happy with his life. However, he becomes "at the age of twenty-one, a hypocrite and a liar; in short a sham. ... a master faker." (27)

In his craze to amass wealth, Ratan loses his character and gradually turns into a shameless "thick skin and a washout" (39). He has a strong survival instinct. In his view, people like him live "through obedience, by becoming servants to the powers of the world" (23). For promoting his career prospects, he gets involved in corrupt practices and as such, he sheds his selfhood. "His inside gets hollow and moth eaten" (Mathur 140). He does not hesitate even in betraying his colleagues. He becomes altogether emotionally sterile. The novelist himself comments 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)

Usual tools for success in this materialistic world, "flattery and cunning" (66) are Ratan's tools, too. He declares: "It is not the atom or the sun or God or sex that is at the heart of universe; it is deals. DEALS." (48) He marries his boss' niece only to get confirmation in his job. By virtue of his servitude to his superiors he becomes an officer in his department. He begins to accept bribes with impunity and comes to own a car, a flat of his own, a refrigerator and also twenty thousand rupees in the bank. He lets himself become "a whore" (47) for attaining power and position. Prosperity demands a toll of humanity, which Rathor freely allows. In spite of acquiring many material possessions he is very much dissatisfied with life. Life for him seems to be an algebra

sum, where X is always missing. Slowly, he begins to realize that "Nothing is more deceptive than men's ideas about getting ahead" (50), yet he keeps sinking into the dark pit of corruption, exploitation and bourgeois filth. 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 of it, the Brigadier, his close friend, has to desert the post that he was supposed to defend, 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. He is alienated even from his wife who is merely a sex object for him. At this juncture of life, he feels lost and lonely: "I was, I now knew, alone." (110)

In the first instance, Ratan had hesitated while accepting bribe; he wanted to maintain his self-respect. There was a feeling of guilt and wrong-doing and was unable to understand "why I took the bribe?" (69) He had suffered 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, lacking in a distinct individual identity. He is solely responsible for his deeds because 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 himself admits: "I was a nobody. ANOBODY. 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". Tapan Kumar Ghosh aptly remarks: "He was not himself but simply a cipher in the mass existence of the crowd, a cog in the social mechanism" (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 suffers a mental anguish and is not able to find the purpose of his living. In his confusion he loses his perspective 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) With the passage of time, Ratan's restlessness, loneliness and dilemma keep growing. He wants to know, if consequences of an action appear in this very life or not: "There might be births without number awaiting us and

a ceaseless accumulation of 'Karmas' but does one not get paid as one goes along, right here, in this birth, in this world? That is what I would like to know" (87). Hari Mohan Prasad seems to concur with Ratan's thoughts while saying:

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)

When Himmat Singh tells him: "You are bogus, Ratan Rathor. ...Bogus from top to bottom. Your work, your religion, your friendships, your honour, nothing but a pile of dung" (131), Ratan painfully realizes that the actual villain lies within his own self. The inevitability of evil boomeranging on the evil-doer is also a major

concern of the novel. Siddharth Sharma says: "Despite the chaotic circumstances, the choice always lies with the individual and when one deliberately chooses evil, it boomerangs" (57).

Pricked by his conscience, Ratan makes a commitment to himself: "I shall be good. I shall not be greedy. I shall not be afraid. I shall be decent." (100) Henceforth, he feels repentant for his evil deeds, abjures his selfishness and tries to feel concerned for others. "Joshi believes that man's transformation lies in man himself" (Sharma 74). Now Ratan decides to be honest and humble. In order to learn humility, a sure way of atonement for his sins, he begins his day by wiping the shoes of the congregation outside a shrine. Thus, Ratan Rathor saves his soul and reasserts his lost human identity.

REFERENCE

- 1 Bannerjee, Purabi "A Winner's Secrets". Interview. The Sunday Statesman. 27 Feb. 1983: 4. Print.
- 2 Das, R.J. "Moral Dilemma in Arun Joshi's The Apprentice." Journal of Literature and Aesthetics. 1.2 (March 1981): 43. Print.
- 3 Ghosh, Tapan Kumar. Arun Joshi's Fiction: The Labyrinth of Life. New Delhi: Prestige, 1996. Print.
- 4 Joshi, Arun. The Apprentice. 1974. Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1993. Print.
- 5 Mathai, Sujata. "I am a Stranger to My Books." Interview with Arun Joshi. The Times of India 10 July 1983. Print.
- 6 Mathur, O.P. "Survival and Affirmation in Arun Joshi's Novels." The Modern Indian English Fiction. New Delhi: Abhinav, 1993. Print.
- 7 Prasad, Hari Mohan. Arun Joshi. New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1985. Print.
- 8 Sharma, Siddhartha. Arun Joshi's Novels: A Critical Study. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2004. Print.
- 9 Srivastava, R.K. "Alienation in Arun Joshi's Novels." Six Indian Novelists in English. Amritsar: G.N.D. U., 1987. Print.