



Existential Values in Arun Joshi's " The Apprentice"

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Abstract :

Existentialism is a twentieth century's most influential literary and philosophical movement that analysis the existence of human beings and throws light on the way they find their existence in the world. It's main focus is on individual conviction to find order, balance and arrive at personal truth in a world of darkness, despair and permission left behind by the two world wars. In such an age and times, existentialism has emerged as a philosophy of re-affirming and regaining the lost status of man in advance scientific, industrial and our technological society. In this advance science-tech society, man himself becomes the victim of his own creation and feels like a mere victimization of a highly mechanized system.

Various existentialists differ on the fundamental problems but agree on perceiving certain objective realities like the crisis in human values, deprivation of human freedom and importance of human emotions. "No emotional problem is more threatening than existential problem." It is an attitude that emphasizes the purpose and the meaning of human existence in this world.

Arun Joshi's novel *The Apprentice* precisely deals with the modern man's emotional, psychological and social problem and is confronted with the problem of Self and the question of its existence. The novelist faithfully records contemporary man's trials, tribulations, tortures and traumas. The protagonist suffers from the strange ailment from the society in which he dwells. He feels as if he is an outsider.

Key Words : Existentialism, victimization, psychological, crisis, trauma, protagonist.

The present paper examines existential values in the novel 'The Apprentice' by Arun Joshi which was first published in the year 1974. Arun Joshi is different from other

Indian English novelists because of his primary interest in individual, and the psychological complexities of inner world. Unlike his predecessors, Arun Joshi is not interested in the traditional themes of contemporary social, economic, political problems rather, he deals with the psycho-existential problems of his characters. In his work, he is constantly engaged in the 'exploration of truth that lies within the condition which often tends existential. Joshi delves into the inner sanctum of human psyche where he finds instincts and impulses at work, and he realizes man's uniqueness and loneliness in an in different and inscrutable universe.

Arun Joshi's third novel, his magnum opus 'The Apprentice'(1974) probes deeper into the inner self of the individual and tries to explore what the novelist calls 'that mysterious underworld' on the one hand, and focuses on the decaying moral values in society. It is the confrontation between the ideal and the real, and depicts the plight of a man in present time, struggling to survive in a society without any moral, spiritual or ethical values trying to find a purpose in a dark unethical world. The novel also be seen as both a commentary on the current social political shaping and stimulating the protagonist and on the other side a cry of the lamented soul. In many ways it is also 'a confessional novel' which employs psycho-narration.

Ratan Rathor who is the protagonist of the novel struggles against the social conventions and the inner conflicts between what he really is and what society expects him to be. The novel records the decaying values of a corrupt and unethical society where honesty and truth are pushed to the back seat and it's place is taken by material values and physical pleasures. In the novel, the protagonist unfolds the story of his life in the form of internal monologue. It hold's the mirror to us to see ourselves.

The Apprentice is a story of a senior officer Ratan Rather, in the Ministry Of Defence during Indo-Chinese conflict, who accepts a huge tre to clear the defecting supply of war material from Himmat Singh, a character who has a great impact on the protagonist. Joshi narrates how Ratan Rathor becomes a victim of corruption in a metropolitan city.

The narrative of the novel covers the pre and post independent India. During this span of two decades Ratan grows from a boy to kingpin in the corrupt official hierarchy. It has an ironical intention, as the message in it is bitter commentary on the post-independent India. The narrative shifts between past and present. Ratan has high hopes that free India will bring new light to the people of the country but to his dismay all his hopes are shattered, as he says:

“__ _the death of my father had meant only one thing to me: That it was stupid to get killed like that stupid and meaningless. It served no one. Those who thought you served forgot you within one the month”

Ratan is a simple man who has come to the city with a lot of hopes to get a good and respected job. But he has to face many problems and hardships to survive in the city. All his dreams, ideals are disillusioned in his never ending job search. His morals and enthusiastic spirit started waning and he started living a life full of compromises. Throughout the novel we see the constant conflict in the mind of Ratan between idealism and realism. In fact, Ratan is a child of double inheritance. He has taken patriotic and realistic values from his father and worldly wisdom from his mother.

His father gave up his legal practice to join the freedom struggle under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. He too, wanted to follow the footsteps of his father and was willing to sacrifice everything without any reward, name or fame. But his mother advises him to earn money- Don't fool yourself, son. Money without worth. It was not patriotism but money that brought respect and security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. She further said that if Ratan underestimated the power of money, he was surely going to be sorry one day and if he had no money "would be little better than a beggar's shoe". Ratan was stunned into silence by the revelation of the "mystery of the universe" of which he had no knowledge. Ratan was confused, perplexed. He had to make a choice. He is in a fix regarding his choice between the conflicting philosophies one shown by his patriotic and idealist father and the other pragmatic and materialistic world of his mother. The conflict of idealism and practical realism at its best. The hero is torn between these two. Money here strikes a keynote and introduces one of the major themes of the book.

Like Ratan, one is alienated in this practical pragmatic world. One has to accept and adjust to the ways of the world. Modern man is surrounded by chaos, confusion, corruption, hypocrisy and absurdity and one feels that he is alienated, to be a victim of a materialistic and insensitive world which does not suit his temperament. Ratan also undergoes this inner dilemma and struggles to decide which way to go.

Now to earn money and to enjoy freedom Ratan leaves home to seek a career in the metropolis of Delhi- for it, "was a city of opportunities". To fail in Delhi would have been a sign of the greatest 'incompetence'. He undergoes a humiliating experience while hunting for a job. Getting a job is by no means an easy task. The novelist makes a dig at the way vacancies are filled in the offices. It was expected that jobs would be filled by people who had, in some manner, been 'pre-selected'. Ratan, soon discovers that being the son of a freedom fighter, has no practical value whatsoever in this materialistic world. All his education and intelligence do not help him to get a good job.

Ultimately, with the help of a room-mate at the inn, he gets a job of a temporary clerk in a government office. No matter if it is a temporary one, he looks forward to rise: educated, intelligent and cultured and it was right that he should rise in life, to the levels higher than he aspired for. Henceforth, his only aim is to make his career. Quite often Ratan remembers his father's making reference to an average man's desire to prosper in life, to make a career, which his father called "bourgeois filth". As

Ratan says-There have been moments in my life where I see nothing but filth around me what can I do? How I get away? I am a thick skin now. But what was to be done? One had to live. And to live, one had to make a living. And how was living to be made except through careers. (Joshi-39).

Thus, he completely alienates himself from his true self and his ideals. Ratan himself describes his own aberrations with a sense of self awareness and objectivity: I had become, at the age of twenty one, a hypocrite and a liar, in short a Sham. I had to lie about numerous other things I had become a master faker. Ratan is, in fact, shattered by breakdown of faith, and what it destroys. We trust and follow some values ideals what we believe to be true and cherish them but all of sudden we find ourselves in situation just opposite to what he believe which shatters us and destroy us:

‘You believe there is justice in the world and justice is not there and, then, some day proof comes along that nothing is so. This is what hurts.’ It is this loss of faith in ourself that makes us apprehensive of our judgment and choice.

The present time is characterized by urbanization, industrialization, advancement in science and technology, mechanization and growing hostility due to changing values, insensitivity, delusions, rootlessness, discontent, psychological and other and other maladjustments. All these and others have made alienation a part of our life.

We live in a world of crisis, crisis of our identity and consciousness. The hopeless and mess of life inspires nausea in Ratan. With a view to bring about change in the existing set up, he also writes an article, in which he holds Indian character solely responsible for the decay and downfall of the country.

In order to get confirmation of his job, Ratan has to agree to marry the boss’s niece. By now he knows only too well that the world runs on the basis of deals, and “if men forgot how deals, the world would come to stop. It is not the atom or the sun or god or sm that lies at the heart of universe: it is deals”. Though, Ratan progresses upward in rank, he becomes increasingly fraudulent and unscrupulous: “The more money I accumulated, the more I was dissatisfied I was determined to enjoy life. He realizes that he has become a faker. He has added a new dimension to his life. He has acquired a sense of docility and obedience. He criticizes the corrupt practices prevalent in the society, but at the same time. He himself was engrossed in it. The theme is quite contemporary. Our present day politicians behave the same as Ratan behave in the novel. There is a wide gap between what they say and preach and what they actually practice. He now readily gives and now owns a new car, a flat, a refrigerator and also twenty thousand rupees. He has become a hypocrite and earned a good place in society but of course, at the cost of peace of mind. He has totally degenerated into his own eyes and suffers a “crisis of character”. He has become a person of double face. At very stage Ratan puts up an initial resistance only to find the futility of the effort which has to surrender ultimately to the minste of corruption. Arun Joshi’s ironic

comment in this aspect of human existence is worth noticing “We sink and we think we are swimming.”

The readers have a glimpse of the hypocritical, unscrupulous and fraudulent Ratan, when he takes an enormous bribe from Himmat Singh alias Sheikh to clear a big pile of defunct military materials. The son of a martyr, who had sacrificed his life and comforts for the sake of the country, barter his soul for money. He did this at a time when the threat of defeat loomed large over the country in the Indo-Chinese war. It was the same Ratan who was, a few days ago, filled with anger, horror and the determination to avenge at the sight of his motherland getting “trampled under the boots of a barbarian enemy”. He had felt that the “Indian character” was at the root of the downfall of the country. He had written a comic document titled “The Indian Character”, got it cyclostyled and circulated among the people. There he had described the Indian people as “a glorious monument in ruin, a monument of which even the foundations had caught canker. The pillars were gone. So were the sculptures and the sanctum sanctorum”. Such a person takes a bribe, that too when he needed it the least. If Ratan needed money it was when he had been offered it for the first time. It was those early days in his career when a half a page note of him had driven a contractor almost bankrupt. He was offered Ten thousand rupees as the bribe but he had felt righteous and proud to refuse it. Ratan’s refusal to accept the bribe when he needed it the most and his acceptance of the bribe when he didn’t need the money, exhibit his fall from grace. Apart from the Superintendent’s enigmatic reply about God and money, where he said “Money in the world always changed hands. God was only concerned with what one did with the money”, what heightened his moral confusion, was the socio-political situation of the country. The situation had hardly changed although the masters had changed. ‘They’ or ‘The Higher-ups’ or ‘The Authorities’ had taken over. Men were weighed in money or power. There were no standards at all. Anything went so long as it was backed by sufficient power. It soon appeared to Ratan that a man without money or power was either “worthless” or “worse than a beggar’s shoe”. How long could Ratan remain non-impacted by the influences of the wide world? It soon took him in its wake, overwhelmed him and smothered him.

Ratan realizes that he is no bigwig. He is only a pigmy. He lacked the courage and the spirit of rebellion of his father. He was like a “wax that turns its head where the wind blows” or a “blotting paper” that depending upon the ink, either becomes black or red. He finds it easier to swim along the current than to swim up stream. Ratan continues his treacherous pursuit of a career through “flattery and cunning” and “maneuvering and downright lying”. He soon becomes a “past master of the task”. He tries to seek solace from the fact that he was not the only one who had maneuvered his way up the bureaucratic ladder.

Ratan soon realizes that not only had he failed to establish himself as a competent, sincere, hard working officer in the office, but also he had failed as a husband. In the

early years of their marriage, there was very little to satisfy her ambitions. The house, the food, the clothes, the neighbours, and the ornaments had disgruntled her. She was also not satisfied with a girl as she always yearned for having a boy. His wife's growing discontent unnerves him. The feeling of his own insignificance results in the loss of his own identity. He becomes a "NOBODY". He discovers himself lost in the labyrinth of life and finds his soul "turned to ashes".

Instead of renouncing the society for the purgation of his soul, he shuns his vanity, expectations, and his cleverness. Every morning, before going to office, Ratan sits on the steps of the temple and wipes the shoes of the congregation. Ratan knows pretty well that he has started the struggle late but he must continue it. Beaming with a sense of hope he says, "I am learning to be of use. I know it is late in the day. But one must try and not lose heart, not yield, at any cost, to despair".

Finally, Ratan understands that he has been alienated from his true self by falsity, Hypocrisy, corruption and immorality. Pricked by his conscience, he tries to find the meaning of his actions, and finally strives for enlightenment. He undergoes the sternest apprenticeship in the world. The knowledge of the sins committed by him, his willingness to own moral responsibility for his actions, and his attempts to set things right make him an earnest traveler in the journey of life. Thus, he tries to expiate his sins by becoming an apprentice to the world of god.

How this novel becomes an existential novel ?

Ratan finally accepts his responsibilities as the existential heroes do. After all, a crime is a crime and where there is crime there is a punishment. Here, Ratan's vision of life, his compassion and sensibility are manifested in the archetypal patterns of conflict between good and evil which is typically Indian. The crime manifested is not declared by the court but it is amended in Ratan's mind which is hundred times more forceful a punishment than what courts of law can inflict. Ratan Rathor emerges from his own actions and deeds. He does not believe in Bad Faith, after initial hesitation yields completely to the corruption of modern society and thrives on it. But ultimately, with deep remorse, he realizes the futility of his life and decides to be of some use to others.

It has been argued that the novel commends the value of humility and self-purification. In this sense the novel is a study of the loss and retrieval of one's soul. We did notice some of the features in the novel which go against Sartre's existentialism as he did not believe in God or Atman too. But The Apprentice becomes an existential novel as it follows the characteristics like alienation, spiritual uprootedness, meaninglessness, absurdity, life without purpose etc. Ratan lives aimlessly but his aim is to live life meaningfully. Ratan realizes that his life has been a great waste. He is not sure what precisely corrupts the atmosphere of the society. He feels the need of doing something for changing the prevailing situation. That is why

Ratan undergoes the sternest apprenticeship in the world. Symbolically, he starts at the lowest, dusting the shoes of the congregation outside the temple every morning on the way to his office. He seeks his fulfillment in this symbolic act. He earnestly pleads with the young that there is nothing wrong to make a second start : “ one must try and not to lose heart, not yield, at any cost, to despair.” That reminds us of Hemingway’s Santiago’s words : “ Man can be destroyed, man can not be defeated.” Ratan has lost his self but his existential decision to recover the lost self through an act of penitence reveals the need to realize and prize of one’s integrity.

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