



# IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES OF ARUN JOSHI

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**Abstract-**Man struggles to maintained self as a whole. Unfortunately, his survival becomes possible but it is incomplete. Somewhere or the other, man has to make compromises if he wants to hold his ground. He holds his ground but on the way sacrifices a lot. His identity becomes jumbled and crisis ridden. He losses his self somewhere in the battle of survival. Ultimately he succumbs to the pressures of society, culture and psychology. His battle for survival leads him to a ground which threatens to make him lose his identity. The individual faces the crisis of identity because his purpose of life and relevance of existence seem to fail. The tensions and traditions engendered with the changing ethos and disturbing demands of love, society and culture contribute to the sense of the loss of identity. The quest for identity brings no fruitful results. On the contrary, it shakes the foundation of a human beings very existence. He is no more the master of his destiny and external and internal forces active snatch away the harmony of his life. He is unable to hold on and hence falls apart.

As a result the strongest problem which comes before us is survival, it is matter of great concern today and man has to put up a continuous and unrelenting struggle in order to keep up with the pace of life. Joshi hits hard at all the directions which lead men away from survival. Thus Joshi's work becomes a fine study of survival, identity and its crisis.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since man became conscious of himself, he has been searching for his identity. He fails to realize his hidden self. To explore all the possibilities, to visualize all the attributes in short, to apprehend and comprehend all that has been showered upon him as perennial blessings by God Almighty and consequently fails to grow to his full stature. The proof of this can be found in an incident narrated in *The Holy Bible*. Saul, the unholy man who used to threaten the disciples, failed to realize the virtue hidden in him, until the Lord spoke to him. The result of this was that unholy Saul was changed into an Apostle of God and named Paul. (*The Holy Bible: The Acts Chapter 9 Verses 3-5*) Unfortunately, the story of Modern Man ends with the unholy Saul. We, as advanced people, do not have complete faith in God and His voice fails to reach us. Hence, we suffer with an identity crisis and fail to realize the power of virtue which might be hidden in us.

## 2. SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

The quest for identity has been one of the major issues, which the man of today faces. Literature being the mirror of society, there exists a whole plethora of literary works dealing with the most fundamental of human problems. The protagonists of Arun Joshi's novels and short stories are also subjected to extreme social, cultural and psychological pressures. His functional characters find themselves in a maze. Their world is racked by misery and restlessness, doubts and hopeless longings, changing and divided thoughts as well as hunger of the body and a hunger of the soul which drive them to distraction. The confusion and erosion of values in the wake of rapid industrialization, urban development, technological progress and an overwhelming upsurge of materialism are depicted by the writer. Alvin Toffler has spoken of the modern man "as the new nomad uninterested in putting down roots nowhere." (Toffler: 1970: 74-94) The characters find themselves in a complex state of existence where they feel lonely, unrelated, unfulfilled and desperate they seek the meaning and purpose of life, but their search for a way out leads them nowhere.

Arun Joshi's novels and short stories are in fact the tales of frustrated dreams, of aspirations and hope of this modern man only living in a state of "permanent exile" (George: 1968: 26) as George Steiner calls it. Their stories are told sometimes with irony, wit and satire but most often with sympathy and understanding. These works are all of a piece, they deal with the theme of man's anguished quest for survival in life's impasse.

## 3. IDENTITY CRISIS AT DOMESTIC, SOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL LEVELS IN THE CHARACTERS OF ARUN JOSHI'S FICTIONAL WORLD

His first novel *The Foreigner*, "is another version of man's quest for understanding his self by shunning the world (Maya) through knowledge (Jnana)". (Dwivedi: 2004: 51) It explores the agony of an individual's consciousness of being alienated from the existing conventions and rituals of society. It examines the problems of frustration at being unable to find a meaning in existence. Sindi Oberoi, born of an English mother and an Indian father, a product of the cross-roads of the West and the East, finds himself a foreigner wherever he goes, drifts from one end of the globe to another in search of peace and emotional stability. But his detachment turns into delusion as he cannot free himself from self-engrossment and selfish-desires. It drives him from crisis to

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crisis, sucking in its wake the lives of two innocent persons he loved the most, Babu and June. There are moments in the novel when the author seems to suggest that Sindi's rootlessness, purposelessness and sense of loneliness are not his problems alone. They are June Blyth's, Babu Rao's, Karl's, Arun's and a lot of others who are as lonely and fed up with their lives as Sindi.

The character of June Blyth is one of the special creations by the writer. He shows the confusion of her heart. June an American girl, suffers from a feeling of emptiness. She loves Sindi and wants to marry and create a home for him. But when Sindi comes to know about June's plan of settling down and having a family, he refuses and detaches himself from her. This detachment tears June from inside, and later on she dies.

Babu has also the same kind of experience. In more senses than one, he is Sindi's double. There is an element of the lost childhood in his character as there is no reference in the novel of his getting the affection of his mother. He also, like Sindi, falls in love with June but when he comes to know the reality that she has been having an affair with Sindi for a year, Babu feels aghast and in this confusion drives off madly, meets with an accident and dies with unfulfilled desires.

Sindi's Austrian room-mate, Karl, feels the void within. He also seems to be a case of lost childhood. Karl, like Sindi, is a victim of loneliness. He, too, is a cynic, a disillusioned individual who is fed up with the pettiness of life around him.

Even Arun Joshi himself shows a sense of being lost. He feels that freedom is an illusion. According to him, we, as human beings are not the makers of our fate. We are just like puppets in the hands of destiny, playing our pre-determined parts. He too, like Sindi Oberoi is in search of his identity.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas attempts to explore "that mysterious underworld which is the human soul" (Mathai : 8). It is about a mystical urge that makes Billy Biswas, a scion of the upper class Delhi society, adjure his family and friends and go to the forest in Central India for spiritual healing and for achieving the highest form of self-realization. The novel turns out, in a sense, to be a struggle between two cultures and attitudes towards life.

Billy is basically an Anthropologist and studies deeply the tribal attitudes and customs. In fact his whole life is organized around his interest in the primitive man. Billy returns to Delhi in order to cure his obsession for the primitive and to settle down in life. Billy decides to get married. He hopes that marriage would restrain him. But, soon after marriage, he realizes that he has committed a blunder. Meena, his wife's concern for money and lack of empathy leads to marital problems resulting in Billy's inner restlessness and a sense of isolation makes him disinterested in family life. In order to forget himself and the agony of life, Billy takes to anthropological expeditions to various parts of India. It is on his last expedition that Billy Biswas meets Bilasia whom he considers to be his future and the purpose of his life. He discovers in her that bit of himself that he had searched for all his life. His union with her suggests his communion with Prakriti, that enables him to find his true self. Bilasia symbolizes the primitive ethos. After the tremendous ups and downs in her life, Billy settles down in the primitive society. But all this process of becoming a primitive is, for Billy, only a means to an end. He is concerned with the quest for something beyond simple primitivism. It is a search for the realization of potential divinity in man. Becoming a primitive is only the first step. But before reaching that potential divinity, Billy dies as he is shot dead by a police man. Thus one can see irony in the character of Billy Biswas.

The Apprentice is a confessional monologue revealing a dark and troubling crisis in the soul of an individual, who is entangled in the mesh of contemporary life with its confusion of values, moral anarchy and his untiring quest for a remedy. It deals with an individual who suffers from the agony of the soul, not due to his escapism or rebellion, but due to this conformity to and victimization by a crooked and corrupt society. "The novel enacts three stages in the human divine comedy of Ratan. The pre-Independence period is the dawn, the period of idealism, the phase of innocence, the post-Independence India is the broad daylight of experience, the inferno of corruption, the last part the area of expiration, is the door to the purgatory." (Prasad: 1985: 60)

Ratan, the son of a freedom fighter, goes to Delhi in search of livelihood. It is here that Ratan gets disillusioned. His friend, a stenographer manages a job for him in a government office and thus begins Ratan's life as an apprentice clerk. Ratan is well settled in life still he cannot feel a sense of satisfaction because he holds his career dear and sacrifices the principles that have guided him all the while. In spite of all the material comforts available to him, he feels discontented. He finds himself deeply lost in the corrupt atmosphere. During the time of the nation's adversity, he gains prosperity for himself by clearing substandard war-material. He goes on the primrose way of pawning his heart and soul for the cause of the worship of Mammon. He realizes that he is after wrong things but cannot avoid being a part of it. It is the death of his dearest friend, that brought change in him. Though Ratan tries to cleanse himself by cleaning the shoes of the devotees, he succeeds in this, only to a certain extent. He has lost the identity of self and feels the pain of loss. He takes the existential decision for his integrity.

The Last Labyrinth marks the point in Joshi's exploration of human reality. "It is a story of deeper seeking through love, a spiritual autobiography of Lost Soul groping for the meaning of life and death." (Ghosh: 1996: 123) The novel deals with the dilemma of modern man, who is essentially turbulent, groping through the labyrinths of life, existence and reality. The novel holds up a mirror to a certain section of the present-day Indian society with its cynicism, hedonism, loss of faith, confusion of values and anxieties. Som Bhaskar, a typical product of the Indian upper-crust, is unable to come to terms with life because of his failure to come to terms



with himself. A millionaire industrialist, he strangely suffers from a discontent, an indefinable hunger that disrupts the harmony of his life and always keeps him restless. He is plagued by a sense of emptiness, of void both within and without; life has become meaningless for him. He tries to appease his fierce, unfocussed hunger by possession of objects like a business enterprise or women (who are merely objects for him), but, once secured, no business and none of the women remain important to him.

He flits from one woman to another, from one business venture to a new one, but far from attaining a sense of fulfillment, he grows ever more dissatisfied. Som fails to decide what to do and what not to do. His anxious reflections reveal no clear knowledge, nor do they provide him with any clue to the riddle of life, death and God. It is the crux of Som's dilemma that he cannot separate the physical world from spiritual and finds nobody who can satisfy his hunger of body and spirit. Thus, the novel ends where it began. Som Bhaskar's loneliness and spiritual agony remain acute. His quandary remains unresolved as he finds no escape route out of the intricate labyrinth in which he is lost.

The fifth and the last novel of Joshi *The City and the River* carries the inconclusive quest of Som Bhaskar beyond the intellectual level to find an internal system of order. Such an order normally demands total commitment as well as personal and collective responsibility but also offers a hope of solution for social and political evils. It is written in line with the allegories of the ancient times. The only difference is that the age depicted is modern. The writer has shown the reality of politics and religion in its true light during the days of the nineteen-seventies. The political happenings of nineteen-seventies show itself in the activities of the Grand Master. The atrocities of the Grand Master, as suffered by the boat-men, show the heartless nature of politicians. *The City and the River* is a symbolic novel. The prologue and the epilogue of the novel add to the allegorical depth of the novel. The city here represents the city state which is governed by the Grand Master with the help of Council of Advisors; the River means the endless flow of life, the Flood becomes a reflection of the rapid changes in our political situation and the Nameless-One is a symbol of human beings who will continue suffering from generation to generation. The various characters are all entangled in the problem of life, thereby revealing their identity crisis.

The Grand Master, who is the head of the administrative set up, is the master of the city and wants to remain in that position forever. He symbolizes the people of the higher society. The boatmen are the poor people who are forced by the Grand Master to obey him and to regard him as their king but the boatmen want to live according to their own wishes. The Grand Master does not like their decision. In order to suppress the rebels, he declares a war against them. He arrests their leader, who is a lady and blinds her. At last Grand Master succeeds in suppressing the revolt of the boat-men and destroys them. But then nature takes revenge. The city is flooded with water. Only one person survives, who is called the Nameless-one. It is he who gives birth to the new generation.

The novel is deeply religious. Human beings are free to choose and it is this choice of theirs that makes them lead their existence in the world beset with paradoxical problems. It is here that the relevance of man's allegiance to God, as against men in power, has its relevance. The Grand Master, despite his all allegedly good intentions, paves hell for his subjects who are denied the basic civil rights. His fate is a pointer that with the extreme handling of the problems, Nature takes its own course to set things right.

Arun Joshi has published only a solitary collection of ten short-stories entitled *The Survivor*. There are two other stories, 'The Only American from Our Village' and 'Kanyakumari' which have been published separately. His short stories also form an integral part of his fictional world. It is not only his novels but also his shorter fiction that deals with the theme of man's desperate and anguished quest for survival in the intricate labyrinth of contemporary life.

The story 'Gherao' highlights the declining sense of values among the youth, resulting in a generation gap and a conflict between the young and the old. It also holds a bitter commentary on the growing politicization of academic institutions in the country. 'The Frontier Mail is Gone' is a story of a young girl and her desire of meeting big and rich people. At the end of the story, she is able to fulfill her desire but at the cost of her body. 'The Eve-Teasers' describes the psychology of young boys that prompts them to seek pleasure by teasing young girls. 'The Boy with the Flute' is a story of a man Mr. Sethi, who has lost his simple faith in the efficacy of prayer which is replaced by his trust in the influence of money. He has become a worldly man, lost in the maze of worldliness. 'A Trip for Mr. Lele' throws light on the degrading influence of large-scale mechanization on the individual. 'Survival' depicts an individual's desperate attempt to survive in modern Indian society which is hooked to the pegs of money and thrives on the evils of materialism. 'The Home-Coming' relates the failure of an individual –a-survivor of war to established meaningful contact with others, a failure that results in a painful experience of loneliness. 'The Intruder in the Discotheque' is a piece of fantasy that deals with the hopeless longing of an old man for youth, in order to get his love. He, however, fails to achieve it fully. 'Harmik' depicts the pain and privation of immigrant labourers struggling for survival in an unfriendly world. 'The Servant' provides us information about a servant, who is accused of an attempt to rape the wife of his master and drive her to death. The story also throws illuminating light on the private crust of Indian society which is marked by superficial glamour and inner hollowness. 'The Old American from Our Village' is the story of a father and his son. The son attains immense success in life but, in the process, forgets those who contributed to it.



'Kanyakumari' presents a disconsolate vision of India where the Sun is yet to rise. The story continues some of the thematic concerns of corruption in national life and crisis of faith, but it does not suggest any way out.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, one can say that Arun Joshi is remarkable in exposing the identity crisis that lies at the core of every human being's psyche in the present times. His novels and short stories are all in one way or the other, narratives of the alienation of displaced people at social, domestic, cultural, psychological or spiritual level. They raise certain pertinent questions about our existence on the earth and its meaning and try to unravel the unresolved mysteries of the enigma called life.

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