

## ARUN JOSHI'S USE OF THE CYCLCLE OF SIN, REPENTANCE AND REDEMPTION IN HIS 'THE APPRENTICE'



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### ABSTRACT

*Arun Joshi (1939-1993) is one of the most remarkable and well known men of letters of Indian English Literature. He is a Sahitya Academy Award winning author in 1982. He is a writer in the pre-Rushdie era and deals with mystery and darkness of human mind. In today's world of book-promos, Arun Joshi would be a misfit as he kept himself out of the limelight. His novels probing into existentialism, along with the ethical choices a man has to make, won him huge critical appreciation in India. Psychiatry was the basic interest of Arun Joshi. Most of the writings by Arun Joshi are filled with his personal experiences right from his youth. Arun Joshi is a novelist who, more strongly than most, has brought to his work that detachment from the everyday, while still acknowledging its existence, which is perhaps India's particular gift to the literature of the world. This research paper has attempted to search out and prove that 'The Apprentice', Joshi's third novel, takes his search for understanding man's predicament one step further toward the transcendental and there is a cycle of sin, repentance and redemption. Its central figure is a man named Ratan Rathor, essentially docile and uncourageous whose life more or less parallels the coming into being of postcolonial India. From the above short description of Arun Joshi's work, one thing is clear that the all the works of the writer centre on the twin aspects of —conflict and —self-identity, which are interwoven and inseparable. In search of self-identity and to resolve the —conflict, Arun Joshi through his characters resolves the problem by redemption in various ways through the cycle of sin and repentance as he does in his third novel 'The Apprentice'.*

**Key words-** cycle, sin, repentance, redemption, apprentice, selfishness, alienation, humiliating, selfless service

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## INTRODUCTION

The journey of Ratan Rathore, the central figure in *The Apprentice* (1974), also charts a path leading away from a Tamasik life of selfishness to the Sattvik state of selfless service. If Billy Biswas chose the Yoga of Renunciation, Ratan chooses the Yoga of wisdom as defined in the IV chapter of *Sribhagavadgita*. It is in this chapter that Lord Krishna declares that when evil forces rise, He will appear on this earth to destroy evil and establish the rule of Dharma. Ratan Rathore is in no way an incarnation of God, but he does acquire wisdom of His light by the end of the novel. He makes a small contribution in his own way to the establishment of goodness in his environment. At the very least he provides an example for others to follow.

The fable of *The Apprentice* works out the cycle of sin, repentance and redemption which is an integral part of Indian mythic tradition. There are archetypal myths where a sinner finds his way to grace with a sudden awakening of his dormant goodness. One remembers the legends of Valmiki, Angulimaala and Gaja-Grah where the resurgent goodness of a persona redeems his past misdeeds and opens the gates of divine mercy. R. K. Narayan's great novel *The Guide* is a famous exploration of this very theme. The dilemma of Ratan Rathore is a choice between starvation and conformism. He is the son of an idealist, a martyr of the Indian Freedom movement; but he has to make a deal with the devil just to survive in the corrupt world of free India. His idealism fails and he makes compromises with the wheeler-dealers of power in New Delhi. In his dilemma of fighting for survival he commits numerous sins and is haunted by the awareness of his wrong-doing.

The Eumenides - Greek goddesses of revenge - are always haunting him and his life is reduced to misery. How he recovers and moves back slowly on the path of goodness with humble penance and service, is the central fable of *The Apprentice*. The story is dark and sad, loaded with post-colonial angst, but the denouement has a ray of hope - fate has given him a second chance. *The Apprentice* is a powerful commentary on the decaying values of a degenerating civilization. It is the story of a young man who, out of sheer exhaustion of joblessness and hunger, is forced to shed the idealism and morality of his father to become an apprentice to the corrupt civilization.

Ratan Rathor, after his initial hesitation, yields completely to the corruption of modern society and thrives on it. It takes him a lifetime to reject the Tamasik world of materialism for he is the child of a double inheritance : the patriotic and courageous world of his father and the worldly wisdom of his mother.

In his feverish pursuit of success, Ratan submits himself to all sorts of corruption that the modern world offers. His corrupt deal at the end costs the life of the Brigadier, his closest



friend. Ratan feels a vicarious responsibility for the Brigadier's death. His sense of Dharma comes into conflict with his life of hypocrisy. With deep remorse, he realizes the futility of his life and decides to be of some use to others. He takes up the menial work of a shoeshine on the stairway of a Delhi temple to purge his impure heart. At the same time a rich limousine awaits him to take to his office. Unlike Billy Biswas who opts out of the modern world in a bid to seek his peace with the primitive world, Ratan lives in the modern world and, though touched by its impurities, he seeks fulfillment in serving others in the humblest form as in the symbolic act of shoe-shining. He holds on to his career. Sindi slowly learns that real detachment lies in involvement. In the same manner Ratan's sense of alienation makes him understand that a combination of humanism and humility can be the saving grace of mankind steeped in corruption. The novel commends the value of humility and self-purification. In this sense the novel is a study of the loss and the retrieval of one's soul. The compelling force of civilized society shatters the idealism of the young like Ratan and compels them to turn cynical and even hypocritical. According to Srinath :

The Apprentice is the tale of a conscience-torn man with a curious mixture of idealism and docility, a vague sense of values, a helpless self-deceptive effort to flout them for the sake of a career, in short, with a deep awareness of the conflict between life and living. Ratan Rathore starts his life as every young man, full of ideals and illusions. His childhood friendship with the Brigadier is deeply rooted. Ratan recollects his father's reverence for Gandhiji whom he called a man of suffering and under whose inspiration he gave up his lucrative legal practice to join the freedom struggle. During the war with China Ratan suddenly becomes patriotic and he is the first to give whenever donations are called for. He has written letters to the editors of various papers expressing his anger at the perfidy of the enemy. He goes so far as to officially tell his secretary that he won't mind being deputed to any assignment entailing extraordinary danger. He donates blood and insists with the Red cross that he must be called again. He brings out a document festooned and decorated with quotations from Mahatma Gandhi and the Bhagvad Gita. It consists essentially of a review of the glorious past (Apprentice, 58) of the country; the beginning of which one can find in the forewords of third-rate history books or in the speeches of provincial politicians. He has further embellished it with some particularly ornate pieces that he happens to lift straight from a tourist's pamphlet. We see that he has attacked all those who are corrupted from every side, devoting several pages to describe all aspects of corruption. Further, we find that he is full of admiration for the Superintendent who coaches him to go up the ladder of government service :

Here, we perceive an element of foolish sincerity side by side with hypocrisy. He lacks the moral courage to put into practice what he preaches. A situation arises when he is trapped into becoming the indirect executioner of his Brigadier friend. He accepts a bribe not because of any need but because of the confused values of the society in which he lives :



*What was right ? What was wrong ? No one seemed to know. Or may be they knew, but when it came to practice no one seemed sure whether what was right was practicable. That was where the rub lay. (Apprentice, 64)*

In the end his moral decency is completely eroded, and he finds it difficult to confess even in order to save his friend who is more than a brother to him. As said earlier, he is the child of a double inheritance, the Gandhian revolutionary world of his father is matched by the sermons of his mother for whom money makes friends, money succeeds where all else fails. He is caught between the two ends of the scale his father who represents idealism his mother the reality. He is baffled at this duality and in order to get courage and benediction Ratan visits the temple, but discovers that even religion is not free from corruption. Ratan is shaken out of his moral inertia only by seeing the faceless head of the dead Brigadier and at the words of Himmat Singh who contrasts both of them. He says that Ratan's father has been a revolutionary, and his own mother a whore. Both lead equally filthy life; Singh avenges the loss of his mother's honour, whereas Ratan is head over heels in the mud of his sins. The apprentice's sense of futility makes him suffer inwardly and he becomes so exhausted that he finds meaning even in zero

*But let me tell you something that a colleague of mine used to say. Life is zero, ..... you can take nothing away from a zero ..... of late, however, I have begun to see a flaw in the argument ..... you can take things out of a zero ! You can make it negative ..... and it becomes negative when you take out of it your sense of shame, your honour. (Apprentice, 148)*

The passage very well illustrates the process by which the common facts of life and mathematical theories can be transformed into the very stuff of literature by imaginative and dramatic treatment. Ratan toyed at one time with the idea of following his father who wanted to be respected and to be of use. He wanted to join Subhash Bose's army. The very idea elated him and he believed that he was ready to sacrifice all without promise of reward or success. He identifies himself with the people suffering for the cause of the motherland :

*Every now and then someone I knew was imprisoned, maimed, or killed and for days afterwards I felt burdened as though in some way I had been responsible for the killing. (Apprentice, 21)*

Ratan however discovers soon that the honour of being the son of a freedom fighter is of no practical value whatsoever in the world. His father, dying a martyr to the cause of the country's freedom, left behind an ailing, starving and cynical wife and a patriotic and penniless son. The people, for whom his father had devoted a lifetime, forget him within a



year. He moves out of his village and goes in search of a job in the metropolis of Delhi. He leaves his home hoping to be worthy of his father and his ideals. As long as Ratan remembered his father he retained his moral core, which gradually got tainted in the competitive urban environment. Embittered with a bleak future, without influential connections. Ratan undergoes a humiliating experience as he is rejected and jeered at while hunting for a job. All his education and intelligence do not help him. Then he learns to keep up appearances by discarding even ordinary decency and friendship. Thus he completely alienates himself from his true self and his ideals. Ratan himself describes his own downfall with a sense of self-awareness and objectivity.

In the process of the strange bargains with the world, Ratan becomes a hypocrite. His hypocrisy fetches him a car, bungalow, and a good place in society at the cost of his peace of mind. Thus his conscience degenerates totally and suffers a crisis of character. In short he becomes a whore in the pursuit of his career and ends up by accepting a bribe when he least needs money. At every stage he puts up an initial resistance only to discover the futility of his effort like so many others of his kind in the contemporary society. He leads a frustrated and exhausted family life. The more money he accumulates, the more dissatisfied he is. A strange fear of death haunts him all the time. He feels restless. When the Brigadier was on the brink of madness in a military hospital, Ratan felt that some priceless essence that he had known and recognized for forty years had vanished. It was the second time in his life that he had felt the pain of another as his own, the first being the time when his father was shot.

Arun Joshi also seems to be trying to make his hero simultaneously a portrait, mask and mirror of the modern man, baffled as much by the loss of parameters to judge right from wrong, as by the absence of moral values. Though Ratan is not shown as eagerly pouncing on all tourists to confess so that he can have the perverse pleasure of proving that all are guilty, he more than once admits to a pathetic need for an audience to whom he can unburden himself. His saying that it is nice to have the student to talk to, highlights another feature of the modern man -lack of human communication. Ratan also does not practise the psychological ruse of judging others before they can judge him. If Ratan's stifling of conscience is inexcusable, his genuine repentance and his refusal to allow his guilt to paralyse his will to turn a new leaf is highly commendable.

Ratan finally realises that one cannot live for oneself because no human act is performed in isolation and without consequence. Therefore each act should be performed with a sense of responsibility. Thus he would like to expiate his sins of cowardice, dishonesty and even indirect murder. He learns the lesson of humility. He seeks his fulfilment in this symbolic act. He feels that the only sustaining basis for action is to be of use to others, without vanity and without expectations and also without cleverness. (Apprentice, 149). He earnestly pleads with the young man that there is nothing wrong in making a second start. Ratan standing at the



doorstep of the temple that offers a deserted look, frozen, petrified, like our civilization itself, (Apprentice, 150) hopes that the young can turn the tide.

## CONCLUSION

The contrast between the earlier Ratan, the apprentice who has been climbing the ladder of success having regard to none, and Ratan, the apprentice who has passed through the dark night of soul, is brought out effectively in the narrative. Ratan, who is not an intellectual as his predecessors Sindi Oberoi and Billy Biswas are, appreciates the distinction between zero as negative and zero as positive and this speaks for the character's development and to make it impressive the distinction is brought home through the mouth of a colleague of his. The tone of the tale fluctuates in accordance with the situation that rises up in a chronological way to give the work the credibility of a story. The character of the Brigadier is presented to highlight in fictional terms the victimisation of the innocent in a corrupt society. Ratan Rathor shuns the consequences of his action and allows the devil to take the hindmost. His Brigadier friend who has been made the scapegoat is stunned and almost hysterical at the impending courtmartial on a charge of desertion on the battlefield. Ratan's life is a journey from innocence to experience and also from self-love to self-remorse. It is now that he who thinks himself as a martyr not as a common criminal (Apprentice, 118) learns the lesson of humility. Earlier he has believed so much in a bribe that can get one a bed in a hospital, a place to burn one who is dead. Corruption at various levels and of different kinds that we notice in the society is brought to light and the narrator himself, who has lost the capacity to be shocked, asks his imaginary listener about the inhuman corruption prevailing in this society.

The way of remorse, repentance and penance is the way of self-realization as defined in the Gita. Such is the path of selfless service that finally releases the torments of Ratan Rathore in The Apprentice. At last, we see his way to get redemption that he has chosen the path of Seva recommended by Indian mythology and also accepted by Gandhi as Michael Lobo comments

*Mahatma Gandhi, an outspoken reformer of the Hindu practice of seva, gave it a practical and political direction.*

Thus, my research paper has shown and proved to a great extent that Arun Joshi has used a cycle of sin, repentance and redemption in his one of the most popular novels 'The Apprentice'

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