

Character Transformation—A Critical Study of Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice*

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Abstract: *The Apprentice* published in 1974 is the third novel of Arun Joshi. It is based on urban middle class Indian background. Here, one finds the character named Ratan Rator being the hero as well as the antihero of the novel. Quite unlike Billy Biswas in the *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Ratan Rator does not abandon the society in which he lives inspite of not liking it. He narrates a story to one of his students and comes out with possible questions that may rise in a reader's mind.

Keywords: Indian English Fiction, Arun Joshi, *The Apprentice*.

Introduction: Arun Joshi uses a narrative technique similar to that of Robert Browning. The novel *The Apprentice* is also similar to that of *Ancient Mariner* where the hero insists on the listener to be more attentive. The novel is further similar to that of Joseph Conrad's *Marlow* where the character Youth narrates his youth hood experience to a group of listeners. The novel narrates the life of Ratan Rator who struggles to establish a career in a corrupt atmosphere prevailing in post-Independent India. The narrative form of the novel enables Ratan Rator to expose his inner self to a silent listener. He narrates about his material rise and moral decline. The novel carries a semi serious tone due to juxtaposing of two kinds of values namely material and moral. The novel brings out how Ratan Rator became a victim in a metropolitan city during Indo-China war. The novel opens with the hero Ratan Rator smartly dressed up and ready to get into the limousine car waiting for him. However, Ratan Rator makes it a point to meet a shoe-shiner on the stairway of a Delhi temple. The shoe-shiner is the ardent listener of the tragic tale told by Ratan Rator. In spite of holding a high Govt. office, Ratan reduced himself to a zero personality by sharing his tragic experiences with a menial worker. In order to atone for his sins, Ratan wipes the foot wears of the worshipers who visit the temple.

The Early Days: The hero Ratan Rator is a product of double inheritance. He comes from a poor family. His father is a patriotic but he is outrageous. However, his mother is blessed with worldly wisdom. Since childhood, Ratan has been deeply impressed by his father's active participation in freedom movement, while he was just ten years old, he saw his father giving up his legal practice along with his wealth to take active participation in revolting against the British. He was shot dead by the British while he was leading a procession against them. The death of his father proves to be a chastening experience for Ratan to break values such as goodness, virtue and humanity. He approaches many for help, but they refuse helping him under one excuse or other. Very often, he is haunted by the memory of his father who passed away while leading a procession. His father used to advise him: "to be good! Respected! To be of use." (TA 19) Ratan's mother accepts money from a rich merchant so

as to support her son for his education. However, his studies come to a crying halt due to shortage of money. His mother advises him to earn money as follows:

...don't fool yourself, son-man without money is a man without worth. Many things were great in life, but the greatest of them all was money. It is not patriotism but money – that brought respect and security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws... but money was law into itself. (TA 20)

The Period of Character Transformation: After a great struggle, Ratan is able to find a job as a temporary clerk in war purchases department. He is helped in getting this job by a stenographer who resides with him. Ratan learns obedience docility, servility and flattery. He gets help from a Brigadier who is his childhood friend. Very soon, Ratan gets confirmed in his service and is promoted as an assistant with a dozen clerks working under him. He marries a girl who happens to be the cousin of his office superintendent. As a result, he becomes an officer and his colleagues call him a whore, an upstart... etc. he is considered by his colleagues as a person who is shameless and corrupt. On the contrary, Ratan retorts to such comments by saying that it is necessary to go ahead in one's career and values such as truth, honesty, hard labour and character have no value. He advises others to learn the worldly tricks so as to survive. He emphasizes that :

....there were men I knew of who had pursued truth, whatever it might have meant to them. There were others who had devoted life times to art or public service. Still others who had suffered endless privation, even death, for a thing called freedom. And, of course there were those who, in the face of the world's indifference, had chosen to expand their lives in the pursuit of goodness – I too have had thoughts such as these. 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. (TA 41)

Ratan is a man known for his ambitions and he responds favourably to things that suit his ends. He gradually becomes a corrupted individual and accepts bribes unashamedly. He justifies his corrupted ways by looking at the rampant corruption prevailing in independent India. He states that no section of the society can claim immunity from corruption by uttering the following lines :

...a bribe could get you a place in a hospital, a place to burn you dead. Doctors, had a fee to give false certificates, magistrates for false judgements. For a sum of money, politicians changed sides – Men took bribes to facilitate the seduction of their wives, women for the seduction of other women. (TA 112)

He stealthily collects a lump sum as bribe for supplying substandard materials to the army forces. He does this shameful act with overt and covert understanding with the Defence ministry. Of course, he is masterminded by a person named Himmat Singh who is smart enough to do unfair things without any evidence. Due to supply of substandard war equipment, the Brigadier gets court marshaled. This incident makes Ratan become closer to Himmat Singh. Thousands of people die due to substandard war materials. In spite of it, the Superintendent of Police acts unjustly and advises Ratan to confess his guilt so as to save his

Brigadier friend. This worries Ratan and he is tossed between making oral and written confession about his guilt. Ratan understands that the Brigadier is on the point of a nervous breakdown. He wants to rescue him. However, he is unable to do it before the Brigadier shoots himself to death. Ratan is sorrow stricken due to the death of his Brigadier friend. Soon his sorrow turns into anger towards Himmat Singh. On the contrary, Himmat Singh blames Ratan for the death of the Brigadier. He says :

“... You are bogus, Ratan Rathor – Bogus. From top to bottom. Your work, your religion, your friendship, your honour, nothing but a pile of dung. Nothing – but pose, a bundle of shams.” (TA 13)

The Period of Realisation: The words of Himmat Singh make Ratan realize the truth of life and nature of existence. He finds himself being trapped in the net of his own cunning desire. He sees life as: “its empty life time. What had I learned? Pushing files? Maneuvering? At forty five all I knew was to maneuvers. A trickster, that was what I had let life make of me.” (TA 139) Ratan understands that there is a whale of difference existing between a good man and a successful man. He has seen many calling his father a good man but not any one calling him like that. He says: “one thing that they had all said of my father was that there was a good man. A very good man. And all my life, I had waited for someone to say that to me. None had. And waiting, I had descended, came to those desolate streets.” (TA 140) He further says that: one has to choose one's own life and should learn to be good and be of use to others and always should remember that, “....whatever you do touches someone somewhere...” (TA 149) It dawns into Ratan's head that life may well be a zero rather than being in negative. He also says that :

“ultimately the lesson of humility and resignation to the will of God, doing what he can, “without vanity and without expectations and also without cleverness is what is important.” (TA 208)

Ratan becomes aware of his earlier foibles and experiences very difficult penance for them. He tries to atone for his sins and gropes for light and devotion. He sheds his negative qualities such as falsity, hypocrisy and corruption. He remembers his father's advice that if one's action does not affect others adversely and is of use, it is a good and moral action. He decides to make his life more meaningful and purposeful by putting himself to use. “Through sorrow, humility and a deep sense of guilt, he finds his way out of the labyrinth by telling himself to, “be good, be decent, be of use.” (TA 142) Although Ratan happens to be the son of a patriot, he is torn apart between money and patriotism. However, the evil instincts in him succeed and make him a corrupted person. The death of his Brigadier friend proves to be a chastening experience for him and he starts preaching to his listeners to sacrifice. He makes earnest efforts to atone for his sin by cleaning the shoes of the worshipers to the temple. The author Arun Joshi very diligently brings out the agonising predicament of Ratan Rathor. Ratan suffers from confusion and is lost in the world of chaos, corruption, hypocrisy and absurdity. The theme of *The Apprentice* resembles very much to Graham Green's *The Heart of the Matter*. The readers understand the profound struggle undergone by Ratan in a corrupt environment. In short, Joshi depicts through this

novel the problems experienced by a contemporary man. "sailing about in a confused society without norms, without direction, without even perhaps a purpose." (TA 145) The individual identity problems are shown in different manifestations by several authors, philosophers and psychologists. The predicament of modern man includes deep – rooted anxiety, alienation and absurdity. Due to global employment, human beings have become rootless. One of the manifestations of rootlessness is self-alienation which again is connected to loss of identity and its effort to come out of crisis. The theme of alienation has become very common among both European and Indian-English literature. In this context, Meenakshi Mukherjee states that: "alienation is a very common theme in Indian-English novel." (Mukherjee 99) R.S. Pathak also states that :

"Indian – English novelist's reiterative treatment of alienation, his persistent delineation of rootless characters and awareness of his predicament seem to be symptomatic of his own up rootedness." The crisis of character, identity or consciousness or authenticity has grown out of man's looking before and after and pining for what he is not. It has become a very grave sociological problem which has emerged out of the international phenomenon of the shrinking world." (Pathak 90)

A sort of inner crisis has impelled human beings to alienate from their homes, surroundings and the community. As pointed by R.S. Pathak, alienation is one of the biggest problems confronting the modern man. Its negative impact is felt through problems such as generation gap, the anti-war movement, the hippie phenomenon, the credibility gap, the compartmentalization of our lives, the lacunae in personal development, the conspicuous absence of a sense of meaningful life.

Conclusion: Ratan in *The Apprentice* struggles hard to establish a career. He gradually goes up in the economic ladder. On the contrary, he goes down gradually on the moral scale. He succumbs wholeheartedly to the earthly pleasures. During this stage of life, he totally discards the advice of his father. His mother advises him to continue doing corrupt things and convinces Ratan that money is the end of all things in life. Her perfidious influence over her son makes him change his behaviour towards a friend who helped him during his hard days. To lead a prosperous life, Ratan accepts bribes and uses unscrupulous means. To make himself more comfortable in his corrupted profession, he marries the daughter of his superior. The death of his close friend makes realization dawn into his head. He understands that he has been deceived and cheated into a spineless flunky. He takes sincere efforts to atone for his mistakes and achieve peace and solitude. He remembers his father words to him "whatever you do, touches someone somewhere and that end never justify means." (TA 149) He has a dating with reality and learns that it is not possible to play truant with life and there is no possibility of attaining salvation outside of it.

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