



## CONSCIENCE IN CRISIS IN THE NOVELS OF ARUN JOSHI

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Arun Joshi has been an outstanding English novelist, who has impressed the reader immensely with his thoughtful utterances, masterly treatment of existential themes and skilful weaving of fictional techniques. Joshi has published only five novels but that is enough to immortalize him in the annals of Indian English fiction. All his novels deal with the existential problems of mankind and in their frantic search for a solution to them, they usually tend to be serious and thought-provoking. His protagonists pass through disturbing mental processes and tense behavior in a given situation. Joshi is an existentialist who does not claim to have read much about Camus, Kafka and Sartre.

The central experience of Joshi's novels is crisis-sometimes a crisis of emotions as in *The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, sometimes a crisis of ethics and allegiance as in *The Apprentice* and *The City and The River* and sometimes a crisis of consciousness as in *The*

*Last Labyrinth*. Joshi's main theme in his novels is quest, one can see how he works out the hopeless longings that prompt all the heroes. Trilling rightly observes that "The novel is a perpetual quest for reality and the most effective agent of the moral imagination of the times".<sup>1</sup> Through his novels Joshi portrays the conflict of the contemporary Indian. His novels highlight the individuals's inner crisis and consciousness. His protagonists throughout their lives try to seek meaning of life in the meaningless world. Sindi Oberai in *The foreigner* is a quester after absurd wants with a vacuum in his soul. Billy Biswas in *The Strange case of Billy Biswas* is concerned with his search for the potential divinity that is there in latent form in his unconscious. It is this "Outer Thing" for which he continues his search. Billy's becoming a primitive is a step towards his spiritual awareness, his existential quest for meaning and values in life. It is this conscience in crisis that drives him to the abode of death. In *The Apprentice*, Ratan Rathor out of an acute sense of crisis in conscience and a quest to understand the meaning of life, undergoes the sternest apprenticeship in the world. Symbolically, he starts at the lowest – wiping the shoes of the congregation and thus begging forgiveness of all those whom he has harmed. He believes that

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Received on: August 2015

Accepted after revision: September 2015

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polishing the shoes of the devotees will cleanse the filth enveloping his soul, will purge him of his vanity and will bring an absolute humility and gentle acceptance of life. He pleads that there is nothing wrong to make a second start. His conscience gets purged to recover the 'self' through an act of penitence that makes him an affirmative kind of existential figure and the personal value he discovers for himself lends meaning to his conscience.

Joshi's Sahitya Academy Award winner novel, *The Last Labyrinth* depicts a fascinating exploration of the turbulent inner world of a millionaire industrialist Som Bhasker whose mystical urge is presented in his perpetual longing for the vitals of life and existence and who is relentlessly driven by undefined hunger which he unsuccessfully seeks to satisfy by possession of an object, a business enterprise and a woman named Anuradha who becomes more and more the centre of his entire existence. He is in quest of knowledge and is always guided by reason, not by faith. He is curious to know the secret of life and tries to probe into "that cove of loneliness around which all of us are built" (54). He is convinced that all the problems can be solved if one has knowledge.

But surprisingly enough his dilemma is not solved by his thirst for knowledge, it is rather aggravated by his intensely material approach. It is Aftab who very plainly gives him the right directive and reminds him that he is different. He doesn't understand them. He works by logic, by his brain. Here Joshi seems to suggest that the unwavering faith is the right substitute for rationalism. Anuradha injects trust and faith in the tortured soul of Som. There is a gradual development of Som's soul on the lines of faith and trust. His journey towards the temple at the mountains to encounter Krishna symbolizes his attempt towards reaching his soul. The dirt and filth hindering from having visions of God are by his suffering. Suffering and humiliation bring an understanding that helps in solving the problem of life. The novelist, through *The Last Labyrinth* seems to suggest that the Labyrinths of life can be resolved through unwavering faith,

trust, intuition and open-hearted prayer to God that help in leading a really peaceful life.

In all the four novels under study, one finds a forward movement from one novel to the other. One finds that the novelist has progressed from Sindi's search for self in *The Foreigner* to Billy's search for true self in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* from Ratan's cry of conscience in *The Apprentice* to Som's cry of consciousness in *The Last Labyrinth*. Joshi has depicted things as he had seen them in real life. He has no philosophy of life to discuss, no axe to grind. He tells Ved Mehta, "I cannot like any writing that is deliberate. If a writer is deliberate, then I can't read him-he is not readable." 2 Joshi's speciality lies in unfolding diverse facts of crisis in modern man's life. He has the potentiality to give a proper fictive form to the chaos in the mind of the modern man and to correlate it to human condition.

#### References:

1. Thakur Guruprasad, *The fictional word of Arun Joshi*, P-155.
2. Ved Mehta, *Joshi is easy to please*, London seeker and Warburg (J)2 P-149
3. Hani Mohan Prasad. *Arun Joshi* P-117.