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Crisis of Identity: A Study of the Major Characters in Indian English Novelists with Special Reference to Arun Joshi

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Abstract

The present article is an addition to the study of Arun Joshi's novels in the context of the theme of crisis of identity and cultures in the postmodern world, in the wake of colonial hangover, economic depressive psychological split-up as well as existential angst and freedom of choice. Main characters in Joshi's novels find themselves in such a mess from which they find it hard to get extricated. The one planet is deceased and the other powerless to be born. The worldly affluence is not enough. Run away from outer world to inner keeps one occupied. Brought up on the western literacy and philosophical phobia in Sartre, Camus Malamud, and other American novelists, Joshi finds it a usual enthusiasm to write about the crisis of identity almost in the same spirit in which the seventeenth century English authors assumed to be melancholy. His novels are structured in immediate socio-cultural striations, and are concerned with moral and spiritual problems of the contemporary Indians. The complex stresses and strains in the sensitive mind of his protagonists are the outcome of the dual forces of native ethos and Western influences. They suffer from uprootedness, cynicism, evils of materialism, loss of faith and identity crisis.

Keywords: Crisis, alienation, Identity, existentialism, protagonist, detachment.

Introduction

This article is a modest attempt to explore, analyse and evaluate his novels, with a specific viewpoint to identify the nature of characters present in them. Arun Joshi has fascination for dealing with the theme of crisis of Identity affecting the lives of the fictional characters who are involved in the plots of different works of fiction. Joshi is a bona-fide genius inquiring deeper into moral and spiritual predicament of the contemporary Indians. He has to his credit five novels - *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and the River* (1990). Joshi deals more with man's inner problems than with outer problems, problems ostensibly social or political in nature. As a novelist who is also a profound thinker, his concerns are different. He writes about the dilution or destruction of man's native innocence by experience, about his rootlessness, restlessness and existential dilemma, about the crisis of his Identity in the present-day world. The rejection of traditional values by the modern ethos in India has created a climate of crisis in which man finds himself utterly bewildered and lost, without hardly any straw of hope or psychological succor to catch it. It is this very

situation of anguish and agony that lies at the center of Joshi's novels. In spite of physical comfort and material prosperity the sensitive minds of India and of the world are terribly at a loss to arrive at and understand the meaning of human existence. It is this meaninglessness of life, this futility of perceptible human endeavor that prompts Arun Joshi to wonder if the gospel of detachment, as enshrined in *The Gita*, could at all be able to bring about man's salvation in the contemporary world.

Objective of the Study

In the seeming absence of research and any specific reading programme developed in our country, we have had to rely heavily on the works carried out by the antecedents. It is apparent to the reader that employing well designed strategies helps in identifying gaps in existing literature to uncover new avenues for future research. Other objectives comprises-gaining deeper apprehension of a specific literary effort, reflecting social and cultural values, and contributing to the critical appraisal as well as argumentative research. It is altogether intended to access and integrate previous studies in order to uncover trends and patterns.

Crisis of Identity in Indian English Fiction

With the achievement of our national independence we may be politically free but there is still an invasion of cultural colonization from the West. Most of our Indo-English authors have been globe-trotters or educated in the West. They have not been able to shake themselves off either from their Oriental roots or from the Occidental influences. Their fictional creations as well grow out of their personalities and schism arising out of their predicaments in which the East and the West do not seem to meet.

It is in this perception that in their attempt to give an assertion for individuality "the Indian writers in English lose their sense of identity- both personal and national- and feel alienated in their own home making frantic efforts to seek, organize and affirm that identity."^[1] In many cases, not only the novelists but also the characters in their novels face identity crisis.

R.S. Pathak catalogues a few of the modern man's fixations and obsessions growing out of some kind of alienation:

Alienation is one of the pronounced problems challenging modern man. Its corrosive impact can be seen in the form of generation gap, the anti-war movement, hippie phenomenon, the credibility gap, the compartmentalization of our lives, the stunting of personal development, the conscious absence of a sense of meaningfulness of life, and so on^[2].

The crisis of character, the identity or consciousness or authenticity has grown out of man's looking before and after and pinning for what he is not. It has become a very grave sociological problem which has resulted out of the international phenomenon of the shrinking of the world. The problem of the East West encounter and North South discrepancies has created a generation which has been influenced by cosmopolitan and international attitudes and connections. Countries of the world might geographically be islands but they are influenced by the mainland. In this, they are not isolated. As against this, men inhabiting these have become islands in the sense that some kind of inner crisis has made them alienated from themselves, their homes and surroundings and the community.

Ever since India came in contact with the West, there has been a cross fertilization of her life and literature. The impact of the West on Indian culture has penetrated deep into the Indian ethos. We have been influenced by our erstwhile rulers in the past and now by the cultural colonization of the nations that domineer over us. In this kind of situation, the cauldron of Indian civilization has amalgamated the outside influences to some extent but the dross settling in the bottom and the froth bubbling above have also caused upheavals in the Indian psychological psyche. These amalgamated materials fail to make us identify ourselves either with one or with the other. Modern man poses to be cosmos in nature; but he is neither purely cosmopolitan nor aware of his roots.

Like so many other alien elements of our civilization, getting integrated with Indian culture, English too has been "indianised" and it is in this medium that Indian English Writers write their works of fiction. The older generation of Indo-English authors deals with the exterior climate, and not the climate of the mind. The Indian English Fiction hovered round the theme of our national movement especially under the Gandhian impact. Murugan the Tiller (1907) and Kandan, the Patriot: A Novel of New India in the Making (1932) by K.S. Venkatramani (1891-1951) are novels on Gandhian theme. Krishnaswami Nagarajan also attempted two novels on the same theme in his *Athavar House* (1937) and *Chironicles of Kedaram* (1961). The big three characters of Indo-English novelists, such as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja

Rao, were also influenced to write novels on the Gandhian theme. Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable* (1935), R.K.Narayan in *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) and *The Wender of Sweets* (1967) and Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* (1938) deal with one or the other of the Gandhian themes. Bhabani Bhattacharya, again a novelist of the older regime, writes in the manner of Mulk Raj Anand. He reveals some yearning for sketching the internal anxieties, but predominantly they are not much concerned with the individual crisis beyond the national and ideological one in their novels touching upon the theme of politics and nationalism. It would however be far from the truth to state that the novelists of the pre-independence India did not deal with the problem of the individual crisis of Identity of character or consciousness. The theme of rootlessness is the chief problem in *There Lay the City* (1942) by D.F. Karaka. The same theme has been recurred in *Zohra* (1951) by Zeenat Futehally. Hamid, the heroine's husband's younger brother, is also Zohra's lover. He has been depicted as an outsider, a melancholy and an isolated man. As he himself weighs up his character, he is "all out of tune, a kind of broken symphony."^[3] He has certain similarities to Arun Joshi's Sindi in *The Foreigner*. The theme of the loneliness of man as a factor in bringing out the crisis of character has been featured in some of the novels by R.K. Narayan. The crisis of character gives birth to the generation gap, which has been treated in Narayan's *Swami and Friends*. Swaminathan's father is alienated both from his son's idealized frame of mind and his mother's myth. The central character in *Mr. Sampath* (1949) shuns his vanishing creation. Margayya's son in *The Financial Expert* (1952) is incommunicative and inarticulate and more so he develops into something of an upstart towards the close of the novel. In *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) Chandran finds his friends "at grips with life, like a buffalo caught in the coils of a python."^[4] Krishnan, a young college lecturer, the English teacher, finds a breach between his aspirations and circumstances. The same theme is distinct in the author's *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967). The son, Mali, gets alienated from his father and Malgudi because people do not accept him in the society after his return from America with his foreign wife. Unhappy experiences of Jagan are typical of Narayan's alienated characters.

Manohar Malgaonkar in several of his novels has taken up the theme of alienation and the crisis of identity. He has taken up this problem in his novels such as *Combat of Shadows*, *A Bend in the Ganges*, *Distant Drum* and *The Princes*. Ruby Miranda in *Combat of Shadows* is a discourse of rootlessness. She is a Eurasian young woman who sought to upclimb and become a member of the white English community. But she finds herself a stranger to both. Her English lover, Henry Winton, also suffers from loneliness. Gyan Talwar in *A Bend in the Ganges* represents those Anglicized Indians who have lost touch with Indian life and who fails to distinguish between the courage and cowardice, integrity and servility, truth and falsehood. Kiran Garud in *Distant Drum* is always cut off from the mainstream of life. The Maharaja in *The Princes* is cut off from Gandhianites to be closer to the British. Kamala Markandeya explores the problem of identity systematically in her novels. She is concerned with the predicaments of identity faced by modern man. Dandekar in *A Silence of Desire* understands the precariousness of his position when he follows Sarojini to Swamy's house:

His sense of identity began to slip; he knew who he was-I am Dandekar, he said to himself, but the words had no reality.

The knowledge of time had gone.^[5]

This experience is followed by his frantic search for identity which, however, vanquished by his westernization. Sarojini tells him:

...you with your western notions, your superior talk of ignorance and superstition...you don't know what lies beyond reason and you prefer not to find out. To you Tulasi is a plant that grows in earth like the rest-an ordinary common plant.

[6]

In her novel *Possession* she presents an account of de-indianization and the consequential loss of identity. The Protagonist of the novel Val is both culturally and psychologically conditioned by the West and also possessed by it. An English woman, Lady Caroline Bell, taking over him is symbolic of his condition. The hero is bought over for five hundred rupees from his parents. He is taken over to Madras where his English lady Byer protects him at the cost of social accreditation. After her exile to Switzerland she settles back in England where "she moulds him into a man, an artist and a lover after the image she has in mind, and in the process ruins him, depleting him of independence and spiritual strength and thus incapacitating him for a search for or an awareness of his Identity."^[7]

The Protagonist's dilemma in *A Handful of Rice* is at the sociological level. The town in which it has been enacted has dark and desolate life. It is moreover "a jungle...a man made jungle, full of snares and traps and unkempt promises."^[8] Ravi records all his sufferings, disillusionments and tragic experiences that are part of the predicament of identity. He has a terror of losing his Identity in an indifferent city which he considers akin to death. He thinks of reverting to the role of an outsider who has opted to come out and declaring a war on the forces that grudged him a living. Her novel *The Nowhere Man* has a very significant title. It deals with the plight of lonely man in an alien land. It explores the crisis of alienation and a loss of identity of Srinivas, who is a figure of loneliness. Even after fifty years of stay in England he feels like a "Nowhere man, looking for a nowhere country."^[9] His eldest son Lakshman is even more alienated from his home; as against them Srinivas's wife, Vasanta, has no such crisis because she remains an Indian all along in everything. On her death, her husband, Srinivas, sprinkles the Ganges water over her ashes and wishes that "he could have found some way to avoid consigning them to those alien waters."^[10]

In several of her novels Kamala Markandeya has taken up this problem and her novels hold a wide-ranging cognizance of multiple factors responsible for the loss of identity and forces working for its quest and regaining. The sense of identity in them, however, is less predominant in the sociological sense than in the philosophical sense. These novels have aimed at working out carefully those philosophical issues which originate from the protagonist's search for identity. The nature and value of the sense of identity has been defined in them mainly in terms of traditional Indian values and norms. The persistent treatment of the loss of identity and struggle to regain it in her novels and others is a proof of the two English novelists' realization of the significance of a sense of identity, although it is a different matter whether he has been able to affirm it in a forceful and precise way.

Balachandra Rajan, the academician, has also explored the predicament of the alienated heroes in his novels. As an academician he has, so to speak, been too long in the West. He has been charged with being incapable of expressing his

inwardness and that his mixed sensibility has made him rootless. But these charges, according to him, "do not deserve serious thinking."^[11] His fictional creations also are prototypical of mixed sensibility. Krishnan in *The Dark Dancer* is alienated from his social surroundings. On his return from Cambridge after two years to India, he thought himself back to an indifferent sky. He did not seem to belong to the land. Looking at the village temple he felt

... No tide of emotion at returning. He had been born in its shadow, but he could have been born anywhere else, anywhere in that parched infinity where the roads narrowed and the gutters wormed among the congested houses, or wherever the scream filtered through the laboring rice fields, and the thatch was pierced by the anger of the first cry.

He was coming back, but not to an identity, a sense of being rooted, nor even to an enmity like that of sun and earth, a struggle against circumstance, a creative confronting, which would open his mind to its depths of repossession.^[12]

Krishnan is torn within owing to the warring elements in his personality because of his relations with Kamala and Cynthia. He thinks to revive the feeling of identity for the country and becomes aware of the differences of roots between Cynthia and himself. He thinks:

England... was her background, just as Indla was his, and the mingling of backgrounds, creative though it might be, also involved an inevitable friction of dissent.^[13]

Rajan's another novel *Too Long in the West* is a story of Nalini who studied at Columbia University for three years. Ever since her childhood her native village, Mudalpur, seemed oppressive and lonely to her. Her too long stay in the West worsens her impression and even her mother feels, as she has been "too long in the West, she'll never fit in. One of Nalini's lovers points out to her:

You won't fit in. You've joined the lost generation. Out of place everywhere and acceptable nowhere. You'll always be an exile and an alien, a self-created foreigner, a refugee from yourself. You can't belong. You'll live in two worlds and fall between two stools,^[14]

These lines may remind one of the theme of Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* (1968) which might have been influenced by B. Rajan's *Too Long in the West* (1961). The dominant impression of *Too Long in the West* is that of pervasive loneliness that tells upon the relations and happiness of various characters and adversely affects their identity.

Like Balachandra Rajan, Chaman Nahal is also an academician who has written several novels such as *My True Faces* (1973), *Azadi* (1975), *Into Another Dawn* (1977), *English Queens* (1979) and *The Crown and the Loin cloth* (1981). As Professor O.P. Mathur says:

The background may be domestic, inter-cultural or the movement of history, but they are all irradiated with emotional, spiritual luminosity of man, the potentiality of his being. His novels are celebrations of life and those of its qualities which give it meaning and its significance.^[15]

Azadi in particular is much more than a "chronicle novel."^[16] The character of Arun in it is a study in identity. He is

determined to emerge a different figure in the changed context in which he has found "a new identity for himself."^[17] One of the themes of the novel is the refugee problem. Lala Kanshi Ram, who has to leave Sialkot and live in an improvised settlement in Delhi, is faced with the problem of his "loss of identity,"^[18] of "personality,"^[19] of the loss of his "ability to communicate with his family."^[20]

The controversial Salman Rushdie has earnest consideration for the problem of roots and identity. Rushdie stated:

And one such suspicious generalization may be that writes in my opinion, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge- which gives rise to profound uncertainties- that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homeless, Indians of the mind.^[21]

Most of the novelists discussed above belong to older era. They all are concerned with the identity and alienation dispute. But their participation with the problem is more at the outer level than with the inner. Whereas the novelists of the younger era such as Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Ruth Praver Jhabwala are novelists concerned with inner identity. Arun Joshi also belongs to this group. Kamala Markandeya who has been dealt with above is "an insider-outside"^[22] as against Jhabwala who is "an outsider-insider."^[23] The alienated person is a stereotyped figure in Nayantara Sahgal's novels. She deals with problems caused by a change in order which views everything in uncertainty.

Ruth Praver Jhabwala portrays various types of seekers after the realization of the self. Her characters have perennial quest for Identity and face chains of crisis. She is at her best while describing conflicts of Individuals and domestic friction. Her famous story named as "The Aliens" is a representative of her approach. Anita Desai's novels are concerned with the life of young man and women in Indian cities. In *Cry the Peacock* Maya's alienated spirit has been explored. Her sensibility has been rendered in terms of immense human loneliness. It springs from husband wife alienation and winds up in schizophrenia. In *Bye Bye Blackbird* Anita Desai considers the disturbing aspect of the loss of identity. It captures the confusion and conflicts of Dev. He is dealt with the initial problem of adjustment at the London school of Economics. His alienation and spiritual anguish are objectified in his abominable experiences in the London tube. He is confronted with the problem of adjustment.

The Blackbirds are the Indian colored expatriates living in England embrace hard times there. Desai directs her attention on the disturbing facet of loss of identity in marrying a wog, Sarah, who "had become nameless, she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity."^[24] *Voices in the City* is a study in the character of a lean and hungry looking journalist, named Nirode, in Calcutta, a city of death. It inspects the inner ambience of youthful despair and is permitted by an existential angst. Late Professor V.A. Shahane writes:

The Indo-English novel, it seems to me has become a primary instrument of art, to unfold the "self emergence" as a historical entity and demonstrate art's dual connection with

self and society. First, the self must define and unfold its existence in the form of fiction, and then relate its multiple relationship with the autonomy of art and fragmentation of social order especially after the Second World War and India's Independence.^[25]

In the above extract late Sahane hints at the gist of the problem of identity. The Indo-English Novelists are engaged not only with their milieu but also with their self-consciousness. This quest for Identity has taken various manifestations. He has to take into consideration not only the problem of his national identity but also that of his individual identity.

As those of a dish washer and a barber and a library assistant, leads him nowhere. His interest in religion, god and mysticism under the impact of catholic priest in Scotland also give him no indication as to the crisis of his consciousness. It is in India as Manager of Khemka's factory that there is something of his becoming close to the community of workers. His relationships with various European girls Anna and Cathy and American June Blythe do not stop his worldly hungers. He comes to understand himself in his contact with Sheila, Khemka's daughter. Crisis of Identity in the novel surfaces at various levels of plot and characterization. Baburao Khemka, son of the industrialist, forgets his roots and is charmed by the promiscuousness of American life. But owing to his Indian psyche he makes no compromise with the fact that June Blythe was also in love with his Kenyan Indian friend Sindhi Oberoi. The tension generated out of it is the cause of his losing balance in driving, that causes his death.

Like the hero of *The Foreigner*, the hero of *Strange Case*, is a man of cosmopolitan education. From beginning there is schism in his soul. His parents sent him to the USA to study Engineering but he takes up Anthropology instead. In India he works as a teacher of Anthropology in Delhi University but here too, from the subject of study, he escapes in to the object of it -the tribal world. The questions of identity always haunt him. His story may also be meant to be based upon the archetype of Gautam Buddha who left his wife and child for the abiding quest. Like him Billy Biswas leaves his wife and even his beloved and marries a trial Bilasia. In all this "his interest in his own identity was aroused and he asked 'Who was i? and where i had come from? where i was going?'".

The Apprentice psychoanalyses the mind of Ratan Rathore, who leaves the course prescribed by his nationalist father, who followed the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi. The narrative strategy in it is that of dramatic monologue. The resulting narrative episodes read like a hymn to corruption. After his father was shot dead in the freedom struggle, Ratan Rathore seeks employment in national capital, where after a lot of initial discomforts he is able to get it in the Department of War Supplies. Here is a story of Rathore's progress in his service career; and the higher he is promoted, the greater his moral downfall. And in his moral collapse, he becomes a hapless agent of knavish politicians, officers and contractors. And started to work against national honor, which causes the death of his Brigadier friend after the debacle in Indo China war in the North East frontier region. But in the long last his moral sense pierce him, and to make amends for his guilt, he wipes the shoes of devotees while visiting a temple. In the words of Mr. Reddy "...he had to abdicate his true self to fit in the corrupt society and eke out a living.

The Last Labyrinth deals with a character Som Bhaskar, hero of the novel, is a type of persona who wants to become a business magnate but is never contended with his lot and

reflects, it is the voids of the world more than its objects that bother me. The haunting cry in Som Bhaskar is 'I want. I want. I want.' Bhaskar was educated in foreign universities. At Harvard he studied not only Pascal but also Krishna and Buddha. His scientist father researched on psychological truths and the first cause of the universe. He is also a plastic manufacturer and after his death Som Bhaskar inherits the business. Som Bhaskar is married to Geeta, who is a chaste Hindu wife; but Som Bhaskar runs after several other ladies such as Leila Sabnis in Bombay and Anuradha in Benaras causes a strife in his life. Anuradha is a model of an antique life and is enriched with liberated views. She is a dancing girl living with Aftab who has no hesitation in allowing her to sleep with Som Bhaskar whom she tells, "You can't marry everyone you love. So why marry anyone at all." This novel also "*plunges into a haunting world of life, love, God and death, the greatest of all mysteries...the last Labyrinth*". *The Labyrinth* deals with both the inner and outer world of a westernized Indian aristocrat who has lost his spiritual roots. Yet he is never at ease despite his inherited affluence and the concept of materialism acquired from the West. He remains an alienated figure till the end. In the end Som Bhaskar attempts suicide by putting the revolver casually to his temple. But meanwhile his wife intervenes and shakes him gently as though rousing a man from sleep. Som Bhaskar in his search for roots discovers a haunting emptiness and space which makes him "mentally shattered" morally degraded and physically exhausted with dreams and insomnia. Som wants to ward off these with his business, but nothing comes to his assistance.

Summing-Up

In chapters, an attempt has been made to study first the concept of alienation and crisis of Identity vis-a vis the major Indian English novelists and Arun Joshi. The advent of English language in India was a sort of an offshoot of British colonialism. Yet with the striking of roots, the align tongue has been acclaimed and indianized with the Indian Republic to such an extent that it is now one of the Indian languages. Indian English Writers have to depict factors concerning the individual, social and national identity. The literature written in the language imposed upon by certain historical necessities has to be national first. If it is national, it will also reflect automatically the social and individual identity. But more often than not it has been flouted. It has been accelerated by certain sociological and psychological factors. It has almost become a commonplace to aver that the past periods were golden, while the present is leaden. Because of this attitude people in every age have regarded their times to be a wasteland. The spirit of wasteland is the chief archetype of the twentieth century technological civilization. Innovations in science and technology, the material comforts made available the shrinking of space and time, the utter loss of traditional moral values and the dissemination of skepticism with regard to the spiritual values and many more such factors have rendered man a plagued creature. These factors taken together have made this age not only an age of anxiety but also one of alienation. In the Indian context the rootlessness has emerged out of cosmopolitanism at the cost of urbanity, belittling of rural heritage, commonly supposed to be rusticity, and the growth of the concept of the nuclear family which has rendered the aged redundant. Hence, there has been a rise in the concept of absurdity and it is highly meaningful that in some of the absurd plays the old parents are thrown to the dustbins. Again in the Indian background there has been a

renaissance of racial consciousness bordering upon the question of indianization, which has surfaced after the partition holocaust. Many of our Indian English novelists either knew of it or had a firsthand knowledge of it; and therefore, could not resist themselves from describing the crisis of identity born out of truncated lands, bereaved families and relatives split-up beyond the borders. Novelists like Chaman Nahal, Khushwant Sing and Salman Rushdie write their novels on the theme of partition from this very point of view of isolation of the battered soul leading to the crisis of the protagonist. Joshi does not belong to this group. Though born before the partition, he did not experience this kind of holocaust; and as such he is mostly silent on it. But the crisis faced by his fictional characters lies at the deeper layers of the sociology and psychology of mankind.

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