



QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN ARUN JOSHI'S *THE APPRENTICE*

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INTRODUCTION

Joshi's novel *The Apprentice* attempts to discover the meaning of life. It tries to devise the ways and means for the eliminating the discrepancy between the individuals pursuits and his fulfilment. The protagonist Ratan Rathor is neither religious nor a saint, but he is humble enough to learn the lesson taught to him by life through problems. Finally he expiates his sins of cowardice, dishonesty and even indirect murder. He learns the lesson of humility.

Joshi finds man in the contemporary society as totally frustrated, separated and alienated. It is mainly due to emphasizing too much on material comforts and totally neglecting the moral progress. Arun Joshi is pained to see to chaotic condition of the society. He, takes in his hand the task of providing a solution to the society, to escape from the vicious circle of rapid industrialization.

Arun Joshi's third novel *The Apprentice* is a quest for meaning in life. Ratan Rathor finds himself trapped in corruption, exploitation, and similar bourgeois filth. His approval of the defective war material which results in death of thousands of man and his friend Brigadier is to face court material in near future. Ratan's confession can save the Brigadier. Ratan finds himself in a tight corner. In order to seek peace and moral courage, Ratan visits the temple and prays to Lord Krishna: "O God, help me. I am in trouble and I have come to your door. Give me refuge. Give me courage. Just for a day lend me your courage. Help me" (Joshi 118).

It can be seen that Ratan is entirely in the grip of duplicity, deception, selfishness and immortality, prevailing in the modern society. Ratan's morality is so completely eroded that he cannot bring himself to confess before the authorities.

Twenty years and nothing gained an empty lifetime. What had I Earned? Pushing files? Manoeuvring? At forty-five all that I knew was to manoeuvre. A trickster, that was what I had left life make of me. Did I know the meaning of honour, friendship? Did I ever know it? Would I ever know it again? (Joshi 133)

Ratan realizes the futility and hollowness of his whole life. He feels that his whole life has been a great waste. He is not sure what precisely corrupted the atmosphere of the society. He feels the need of doing something for changing the prevailing situation. But he is full of doubts about the way to rid the society of this pestilence. Ratan finally realizes 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.

According to Gandhi, the greatest religion of man is to put oneself to selfless service which only suffering and sacrifice can make possible. Ratan chooses to have complete faith in god and in selfless social service. Thus, he opts for the ethical choice by which, in Kierkegardian sense, he surrenders his self to God. Hence out of an acute sense of alienation and a quest to understand the meaning of life. Ratan undergoes the sternest apprenticeship in the world. Every morning he goes to the temple to wipe the shoes left near the threshold by the devotees.

Through the character of Ratan, the novelist seems to project that in life no man has courage to whole heartedly choose right or wrong. He presents a curious mixture of self-evasion, vanity, self-condemnation and humility. But the fact Ratan could not bring himself to confession confirms his self-love and cowardice which he now wishes to cover-up by his humility of action. On a close reading, the novel evokes a continued distrust of Ratan even to his act of atonement. If it is read the other way round then the novel becomes a bad homily on the sin of dishonesty.

As a result, Arun Joshi suggests another remedy to problems of life, which is within the easy reach of the common man. Ratan comes to realize and rightly so that life may well be a zero, but it need not be negative. He becomes conscious of the folly of his earlier life and undergoes the most difficult penance for his earlier misdeeds. Every morning on his way to the office, he sits on the steps outside the temple and wipes the shoes of the congregation.

Though the future of the country looks gloomy, yet the young, as Ratan tells the listener "might yet hold back the tide" (Joshi 144). The novelist pins his hopes on new generation and ends the novel with a positive note of affirmation. There is hope as long as young men are willing to learn and ready to sacrifice, as they have done many a time before. Ratan exhorts the young to rise to the occasion and make a second start. It is never too late. And late is better than never. Thus novel ends at dawn, symbolic of Ratan's transformation and regeneration.

The novel reflects the Indian beliefs, Myths, Cultural, Social and Spiritual imprints and ways of thinking. It mirrors the present day life of human being like Ratan. The outer surroundings of society stand for empty materialism, which is symbolic of the inner emptiness of modern human beings. The moral values are the true spirits of human culture and if it collapses, it creates a deserted path for future. It is the tale of conscience torn man with a curious mixture of idealism and docility, a vague sense of values.

Man, basically is a rational creature. Being a part of its social structure he must fit himself at home in these religion-social norms. If he feels uprooted for want of scientific evidence he is totally frustrated and finds support of a society through language. For him this life becomes simply a journey from nothingness to nothingness leading to dilemma. Every aspects of the life of the people are reflected through literature. The modern Indian literature which was born on Indian side in the hands of Indians is widely acclaimed even outside the land of its birth. It becomes more picturesque, crystal clear and deep penetrating when the author is skilful and expert in delineating the situations, circumstances, dark crisis of characters and efforts of men of our time. The portrait delineated has become a mirror of contemporary society the image of all and of no one.

Another corrupt deal at the end of the novel costs the life of Brigadier, who was Ratan's closest friend. He becomes the modern man in real sense by following cunningness, deceptiveness, selfish and easy going attitude. The character of Ratan painted by Joshi represents the trend of modern people for fulfilling his ends. He does not care for the life of soldiers who are devoting their life for protecting the integrity of the nation. Joshi tries to make his hero a

portrayed mask and mirror of the modern man baffled as much as by the loss of parameters to judge right from the wrong as by the absence of moral values.

In fact "*The Apprentice*" is an X-ray vision of Ratan Rathor's soul, a character fighting against many inner violent forces and with the unfortunate destiny. The character of Ratan in "*The Apprentice*" is a combination of humanism and religion which teaches the society that whosoever is steeped in corruption can save the society by way of following the path of religion.

The sense of meaninglessness of life scolds him inwardly and leaves him exhausted. Out of sorrow and humiliation, he is not able to understand the meaning of life. He tries to expiate his sin and he undergoes the strongest apprenticeship in the world. He wipes out the shoes of the people sitting on steps outside the temple every morning: "I stand at the doorstep and I fold my hands, my hands smelling of leather and I say things. Be good, I tell myself. Be decent. Be of use." (TA 143) He shows that in life no man has courage to choose whole-heartedly either right or wrong. He is himself a bundle of self-evasion and vanity, self-condemnation and humility. The fact that he could not bring himself to confession confirms his self-love and cowardice, which he now wishes to cover up by his humility of action. The whole business of living he fails to differentiate between right and wrong.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the novel depicts the search for purpose of life of the protagonist Ratan Rathor and his plight in "society without norms, without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose" (TA 70). Arun Joshi focused mainly on the quest for identity and used his technique through the character of these novels. Trends in recent fiction unmistakably indicate how a new novelist like Arun Joshi and some other writers are trying the new paths.