

## Mythological Aspects in the Novels of Arun Joshi

Ms. Anita Sharma

Asst. Professor, Department of Humanities

Truba Institute of Engineering and Information Technology, Bhopal

Email: [anita.truba@gmail.com](mailto:anita.truba@gmail.com)

### Abstract:

Arun Joshi is an outstanding Indian English novelist who has outlined human predicament caused by inner crises of man living in present world. In his novels Joshi has focused not on socio-economic or existing political issues at all but he has carefully touched deep and very sensitive layers of human being. Joshi's works reflect strong influence of Indian spiritual ideology. He is one of those Indian fiction writers who have effectively tried to reflect eternal metaphysics and ethos by their protagonists.

**Key words:** Karma Yoga, Detachment, Attachment.

Joshi in his novels focused not only on socio-political issues but he has carefully touched deep and very sensitive layers of human being. His novels reflect his strong faith on Indian Mythology. "Hinduism, Joshi believes is highly existentialist-oriented philosophy since it attaches so much value to the right way to live (to exist)."<sup>1</sup> The Vedanta philosophy, the teachings of the Gita and the way of life taught by Mahatma Gandhi had a great influence on Arun Joshi. "This impact is not casual or coincidental: it seems to form the philosophical and ethical fabric of some of his major work."<sup>2</sup> Joshi's first three novels *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and *The Apprentice* deal with three ways of redemption as preached in *The Bhagvadgita*, the *Karmayoga*, the *Jnanayoga* and the *Bhaktiyoga* respectively.

*The Foreigner* is a story of state of mind of the people facing human predicaments. The novel reflects the principles of Karma yoga described by Lord Krishna to Arjuna in the battle of Kurukshetra in order to resolve his confusion. The protagonist of the novel Sindi Oberoi cuts his life between attachment and detachment (to do or not to do).<sup>3</sup> He seems to follow principle of Karma throughout the story. He is against the actions performed merely to attain Bhautik Shukh in life. In his opinion, the life of those who run behind material happiness throughout their life like Mr. Khemka is meaningless. He falls in love with June, the central female character of the novel but his strange behaviour confuses her. He denies strong desires of June to get married with him. In *The Foreigner* Sindi Oberoi, a rootless hero who seeks detachment from the world at last, comes to realize the actual meaning of the theory of detachment as depicted in the *Gita*, "sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved." (Arun Joshi, *The Foreigner*, p. 188) In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* the protagonist, Billy Biswas, goes to the hills, in the lap of Nature, like the seers in Indian legends and scriptures, in search of his spiritual height and to get inner peace. In *The Apprentice* Ratan Rathor tries his redemption through humility and penance. In *The Last Labyrinth* Joshi presents the mysteries of love, God and death. In *The City and the River* Joshi reveals his cultural and spiritual ethos. He presents the quest for spiritual commitment and inner soul that surpass all religions.

The novels of Arun Joshi do not reveal to us much about his knowledge of the Sanskrit learning. In *The City and the River* the ancient Indian language, Sanskrit has been referred to as "the forgotten tongue" (*The City and the River*, 9) and "the ancient tongue that no one understood." (*The City and the River*, 10) In *The Last Labyrinth* Som Bhaskar on the Ganga ghat refers nostalgically to the recitation by Pundits from the ancient texts: "A young Sanskrit scholar recited hymns on the top of his voice. I thought of my father and the little books of the *Upanishads*. Another boy equally young corrected him. Did Panini ever live in Benaras?" (*The Last Labyrinth*, 48) This is perhaps all that he has written about Sanskrit in his novels. But it is a certainly that being born and educated in early years at Benaras, he might have schooling in it up to the secondary level. Whatever may be the reality he uses ideas from *the Bhagwad Gita*, *the Upanishads* and some other system of Indian philosophy. The idea in *The Foreigner* relates to the problem of attachment versus detachment expounded in the *Bhagwad Gita*. Sindi Oberoi suffers from a wrong conception of detachment and as such does not want to get involved in action. But the presentation of detachment as panacea for life's problem as exemplified by Sindi Oberoi is erroneous. The dilemma of the factory worker, Muthu, and his exhortion makes Sindi realise his mistakes. It enables to attain self-knowledge as he realizes:

Detachment at that time had meant inaction. Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it. The Gods had set a heavy price to teach me just that. (*The Foreigner*, 239)

In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* Arun Joshi has perhaps deliberately created a work of fiction on the concept of Prakriti and Purusha on the Sankhya system of Indian Philosophy. R. S. Pathak has explained the narrative of Bilasia and Billy on the Sankhya concept of the fusion of Prakriti and Purusha:

As Billy's example testifies, if one is able to establish a rapport with the primitive forces in the world of nature, one can get rid of all problems of life. Bilasia, it is held, symbolises "the primitive culture," the untapped subterranean resources of psychic energy. It would be better to regard her as the matter (Prakriti), which according to the Sankhya system of Indian Philosophy, is "one" and eternal, not an illusionary appearance but something real. Billy might be taken to represent the soul (Purusha), which by its mere presence excites Matter and illumines the process of evolution of the universe. Bilasia, we are reminded, is "the embodiment of the primal and invulnerable force that had ruled these Maikala hills; perhaps this earth, since time began." Her "enormous eyes," we are told, "poured out a sexuality that was nearly as primeval as the forest that surrounded them." In the Sankhya philosophy the material universe is traced to a First Cause.<sup>4</sup>

In *The Apprentice* the way which Ratan chooses for the purification of his soul meets the vision of Bhakti in *The Bhagavadgita*: Ratan undergoes expiation and believes that purification is to be obtained not by any ritual, or dogma but by making amends. The polishing of shoes of the devotees by him cleanses the filth enveloping his soul. His earlier atheistic attitude towards is gone and Ratan comes to believe that only God can help him. His sitting in front of a temple signifies his devotion (Bhakti) in which the devotee can appease his God just by praying to him meekly.

Arun Joshi has imbibed knowledge of psychology and philosophy of both East and West. His narrative technique has been influenced by the psychology of the stream of consciousness which we find in several of his novels. He mentions Freud in connection with Leila Sabnis in *The Last Labyrinth*. She has behind her seat philosophers of America and Europe and "Freud as well bearded and saintly, indefatigable, groping in the night of man's mind, strewn with piss, excreta, struggling to put man together, the pervert and the insane but also those who, whole otherwise, walk the beaches at night and cry for the spirit." (*The Last Labyrinth*, 77) This is a kind of summary of the Freudian psychology. Joshi also refers to certain other European philosophers such as Pascal, on whom Som Bhaskar did a paper at Harvard. A quotation from him has been given:

Let us weigh the gain and loss in wagering that God is, let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all, if you lose, you lose nothing. (*The Last Labyrinth*, 11)

Joshi believes in the Freudian motive behind literary creation, which grows out of fantasy and reality. On many occasions in *The Last Labyrinth*, there are specific references to Krishna, Buddha, Tukaram and even Yajnavalkya whom he refers to in an Upanishadic quotation:

When the sun is set and the Moon is also set, and the fire has sunk down and the voice is silent, what, then Yajnavalkya, is the light of man? (*The Last Labyrinth*, 108)

Som Bhaskar guesses what Yajnavalkya could have answered. Joshi's Hindu psyche makes him refer to Bhaskar's performing the last rites of his father at Hardwar. There are also references to several deities of the Hindu pantheon. Bhaskar recalls the statue of the Trimurti at Elephanta caves:

Heavy lipped Brahma, Rudra with snakes and a third eye; Vishnu almost effeminate. (*The Last Labyrinth*, 23)

Som Bhaskar also thinks of the dormant Kundalini power:

I feel rage whipping at the end of my spine, and shooting up with the skull, to some dark hollows where the serpent slept, just waiting to be stirred. (*The Last Labyrinth*, 20)

We can find so many references to the Tantrik cult in *The Last Labyrinth*. Of all Joshi's novels *The Last Labyrinth* has perhaps the greatest number of reverberation from the different philosophical systems of East and West dealing mostly with the labyrinthine ways of life and death.

Arun Joshi's last novel *The City and the River* also centres around the basic principles of Hindu philosophy which teaches an affirmative attitude to life. The novel presents before us a city which is in the jaws of destruction due to its people who never seek the righteous way of living. Throughout the novel there is a conflict in the city folk to choose between the "allegiance to God" and "the allegiance to Man" or in simple words between religion and politics. The doctrine of Karma asserts that man's final growth depends on him. His future is no pre-determined. He is a responsible agent who by the "integration of Karma, jnana and Bhakti" (Rao: 150) reaches his salvation.

Joshi has used various myths, legends and archetypes to suggest the value of an authentic life, faith and right action-the barest necessity of modern man. The political scenario of the city is used as backdrop of the novel which helps the novelist in presenting a contemporary problem with the metaphysical overview of creation and disintegration, sristi and pralaya dealt in Indian myths. Whenever human beings degenerate, anarchy and meaninglessness take them in their grip leading them nowhere. If they do not mend their ways the process of sristi and pralaya after a period of time is to go on unless the whole world is purified. The canvas of *The City and The River* is very vast and encompasses within its range time, God, Man and Nature. Thus we find that Arun Joshi makes a use of Vedanta, the philosophy of Karma, and Lord Krishna's concept of "detachment" and "involvement" to bring out the inner recesses of his protagonists.

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