

Arun Joshi's Use of Symbolism in "The Foreigner"

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Abstract: The purpose of this research paper is to analyze how Arun Joshi used symbolism as a technique to express the human predicament. Arun Joshi uses symbols to present the mystery of human existence. A deep study of the novel reveals that the central experience of his fiction is crisis and quest. Dealing with Sindi Oberoi's journey from detachment from the world to his involvement in it, the novelist depicts Sindi's anguish resulting from his loneliness and rootlessness. It is the good use of symbolism that Joshi succeeded in exploring the predicament of the protagonist struggling to arrive at reality in the midst of utter chaos and meaninglessness of the mind.

Key words: Symbolism, Alienation, outsider, rootlessness

Arun Joshi is one of the finest novelists of India who lays stress on the problems of modern world. Everything is unique whether it is thematic aspect, art of fictional technique or symbolism. Using images and symbols proves to be a significant toll in the hands of a writer to run the plot of any work. On Indian literary canvas Arun Joshi is one among many writers who deals with various aspects and communicated his feelings to the audience by using this tool in the best way possible. He is writer by choice and a management consultant by training and profession. He published five novels and all his novels focus on man's alienation, his awareness of his rootlessness and the consequential loneliness and anxiety that envelops man in a highly materialistic, self centered and corrupt society. He delves deep into human soul, divided against itself and articulates its urges and aspirations with rare psychological insight.

The Foreigner (1968) is a well written story. The novelist has dealt with the theme of alienation quite evocatively. Joshi has posed prominently the issue "between detachment and involvement, indifference and communion." The novel has been written in the reminiscent manner and has confessional tone and style throughout. Sindi, the protagonist, in the course of his journey from innocence to experience learns that it is better to be a committed individual than a detached person. To communicate all this in his novel the novelist Arun Joshi makes good use of symbolism but before we try to discuss his unique way of using symbolism as a technique in his novel **The Foreigner** we will make an attempt to understand the very concept of symbolism.

The word symbol is derived from "Symballein, meaning 'to throw together', from the Greek 'symbolon' and Latin 'symbolum' which mean token, sign." (Webster, 2003: 1190). **The New Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary** defines symbol as a "thing standing for or representing something else, especially material thing taken or representing immaterial or abstract thing as an idea or quality; written character conventionally standing for some object, process etc."¹ In the

Readers Digest Great Illustrated Dictionary the term symbol means “something that represents or stands for, or is thought to be typified, something else by association, resemblance or convention especially, a material object used to represent something invisible such as an idea: the dove is symbol of peace.”² M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham in **A Glossary of Literary Terms** defines symbol as “anything which signifies something else.”³ Although symbolism was introduced into England in 1899 but the fact is that people used symbols in past also for expressing their feelings and thoughts about phenomena, life and death. Symbolism can be part of any genre of literature. Symbolism can be encountered in novels as well, though poetry and drama have greater use of symbolism. Just as characterization and dialogue and plot work on the surface to move the story along, symbolism works under the surface to tie the story’s external action to the theme. Early in the development of the fictional narrative, symbolism was often produced through allegory, giving the literal event and its allegorical counterpart a one-to-one correspondence.

Arun Joshi is one among the great Indian novelists who has used symbolism as a technique in his novels to great advantage. For him symbolism is not mere a theoretical appendage but an effective tool through which he provides aesthetic tinting and vesture to the actions and consequent functioning of his characters in constant co-relationship with events, incidents, images and the like. In Arun Joshi’s novels we find man caught in the labyrinths of isolation and despair. This could not be done so well and so effectively only through direct narration without taking recourse to a pattern of symbols in the novels. Arun Joshi found that symbolism was the only technique that he could effectively use to provide effective medium to his presentation of dilemma and despair.

In **The Foreigner** (1968), Sindi Oberoi, the narrator-hero is treated as a foreigner wherever he goes. Arun Joshi seeks to explore his anguished consciousness of being alienated from the convention and rituals of the society. It is the story of Sindi Oberoi who was born in Kenya of an English mother and Indian father. Though his father was an Indian, he could hardly call himself a Hindu. He expressed his doubts in these words: “Anyway I can’t really be called a Hindu. My mother was English and my father, I am told, a skeptic. That does not seem like a good beginning for a Hindu, does it!”⁴ The only things that Sindi remembers about his parents is that they died in an air crash while he was a child, just four. Their only reality for him is a “a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs.”⁵ Since that day he has been moving from one place to another like a person without any anchor. Sindi remains a foreigner whether he is in London, Boston, or Delhi. He cannot think of himself as belonging to any country in particular and wonders if he could be a world citizen: “did I belong to the world?”⁶ But the sense of foreignness that afflicts him and makes him alienated from others is not geographical, as it might appear but that of the soul.”⁷

The existential dilemma of the modern times and the various issues connected and linked with it have been dealt with great artistic excellence in the novel **The Foreigner**. And Arun Joshi has used symbolism to express this existential dilemma. The title of the novel as well as the

name of the protagonist (“Surrender” ‘Surinder’ shortened to ‘Sindi.’) suggests this existential dilemma. A ‘foreigner’ is one who is from outside a particular social group or community; an outsider. This is certainly the case with Sindi Oberoi. Sindi is rootless, restless, anchorless, and ‘luckless’ in this mad world. He describes his whole existence as being “alone in the darkness.”⁸ Since the day Sindi began to know about his person and personality he has been a proverbial ‘Existential Everyman.’ He is continually torn by a “a strange feeling of aloneness and aloofness.”⁹ He appears before us as a perennial outsider, a person who can have no respite from movement. This phenomenon of Sindi’s incessant journeying is symbolized by the incessant movement of a leaf in the storm. He had gone to the U.S.A. for higher studies but instead of continuing there he drifted back to India but here too he is no better than a stranger, a foreigner. In this connection it must be noted that the two countries are characterized as two living and throbbing entities. In terms of meaning the two countries symbolize a trap in the form of distracting forces of evil and indifference causing traumatic experiences in people’s lives. Sindi Oberoi’s sense of being a complete alien and stranger in the U.S.A. is characterized by the description of America as “a place for well-fed automations rushing about in automatic cars.”¹⁰ Conditions in India are not favourable either and in symbolic terms Sindi Oberoi is appalled by “the stagnant deadness”¹¹ of the country. All in all Sindi’s mood of despair and alienation is symbolized by the analogy of his being surrounded by vagueness and uncertainty. While America is characterized by ‘automations’ India is signaled by ‘darkness.’

The plot moves and Sindi also moves from place to place. When he comes to Delhi he feels that he is going to stay here for good and his journeying might be over but as soon as he comes to Delhi he begins to think of Nairobi where he was born. The other places besides these two towns, London, Soho, Scotland and Boston, are all associated with him. They all are associated with different periods of his life and the different experiences he has had in these towns. During his chequered career he has been a dish-washer, a bar attendant, an employee in a small village library, a student. He also came in contact with many people, including June Blyth and Babu Rao Khemka. It must be remembered that his stay in these places or his acquaintance with characters was not deliberate. The choices were, at best, circumstantial, “un-premeditated, hardly ever consciously deliberated.”¹² Thus, from the very beginning Sindi Oberoi is seen enmeshed in the predicament of an outsider, an alien, a foreigner. This predicament is expressed by Sindi Oberoi to Babu Rao Khemka in these words: “You had roots in your soil you lived upon. Look at me. I have no roots. I have no system of morality.”¹³

This makes it apparent that Sindi’s ‘foreignness’ lies within his personality. His inability to resolve his dilemma is symbolically verbalized through his words to June: “Our aloneness must be resolved from within.”¹⁴ This rootlessness and sense of foreignness might be the reason why Sindi is not able to develop lasting and relationships with people. The battle that Sindi is fighting within the soul is characterized through a battlefield – “a battlefield within the child and the adult warred unceasingly.”¹⁵ Then,, Sindi Oberoi’s disastrous failure in uniting himself with

people and things is symbolized through an odd comparison. The novelist says that in Sindi's consciousness things kept fizzling out "like an ill-packed cracker."¹⁶

Sindi Oberoi is a rootless character. There is confusion and disorientation in his personality. All this is symbolically expressed by Arun Joshi through Sindi's meeting with a minor artist, named Anna, who is equally rootless, because she is living in separation from her husband. Sindi's alienation and hollowness of existence are highlighted by his symbolic meeting with this Soho artist who yearns neither for finer things of life nor for good relations with people, but her only obsession is with her "lost youth."¹⁷

Sindi oberoi cannot claim any place to be his home because of being rootless person. He is a constant drifter who can not belong to any particular place. This rootless nature of existence of Sindi highlighted through the symbolism of roads that led nowhere. Arun Joshi time and again refers to the pathlessness of the roads of New York that bring a person nowhere. The way in which an old Indian song is exemplified here shows that Arun Joshi is keen to speak about pathlessness: "Who knows where the road will lead? Only a fool can say."¹⁸ The songs at once sets Sindi Oberoi thinking and he remarks that the meaninglessness of his existence is complete and his existence is no better than that of "an idiot."¹⁹

Sindi's desire to escape from America has been narrated with another symbolism that of the dead leaves. Sindi wanted to escape from himself that appeared the most "decayed."²⁰ He thought of departure as a process of walking up a ramp and a day later finding himself in an enchanted island where nobody recognized him and he could start his life afresh. Sindi ruminates, "Like many of my breed, I believed erroneously that I could escape from a part of myself hopping from one land mass to another. I was like a river that hopes to leave its dead wood behind by taking an unexpected plunge over a steep precipice."

The novel **The Foreigner** opens on a highly symbolic note. The novel commences in a mortuary which usually symbolizes sorrow and death and irreparable loss. Sindi Oberoi has gone there to identify the body of Babu Rao Khemka, who was known to him and who had died in a car accident. When he looked at the dead body of Babu Rao he found "a dark bottomless hole" gaping in place of the right eye. The sensual upper lip was gone, leaving behind a horrible grin that showed no sign of ending."²¹ Soon, we are told, tiredness crept over Sindi's legs, "turning them to stone. My eyes felt overly dry and my throat contracted." After signing the papers Sindi moved out. The clerk asked him if she should call a cab for him. Sindi replied "I did not know where I was going so there was no point in calling a cab."²² All this foreshadows the pact that life is all meaningless and it is nothing better than a charade.

For quite a long time Sindi Oberoi had lived under misnomers. But after many conflicts and adventures he is able to gather experience. These conflicts are also symbolically drawn. Sindi say that his conflicts have been internal rather than external and that the conflict has been

between “the saint and the lusty beast.”²³ This teaches him a sense of detachment from everything that happens around him.

The ending of the novel suggests that Sindi Oberoi has begun to have the feeling of belongingness and his days of rootlessness are coming to an end. This is suggested by the image of replacement of things at their original places. When Muthu has persuaded him that he should not go to Bombay, Sindi comes home. “After dinner, much to the surprise of my servant, I unpacked my things and put them back as nearly as possible in their old places.”²⁴ This decision is again symbolized by the teachings of the Gita: ‘Sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved.’ Only by getting headlong in the battle for survival can one attain freedom.

Arun Joshi in his novels engages himself in a search for the essence of human living. Joshi, an outstanding novelist of the human predicament, has brought out in his four novels the inner crisis of the modern man. His protagonists are alienated from the sinister, materialistic world around them and they try to work out their destiny in their own way. Arun Joshi uses symbolism to bring characters and their circumstances to life in readers’ minds.

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