

Exploring Existential Concerns in Short Stories of Arun Joshi

Dipender Singh Chauhan

Teacher Educator

Faridabad (N.C.R)

Arun Joshi's output as a story writer is meager and he bequeathed only a collection of short stories entitled "*The Survivor*" (1975), which contains ten stories viz. Except for a few passing references, not much critical effort is made to evaluate Arun Joshi's short fiction which in fact touched upon the various issues that predetermine the existence on this planet. The characters seem to be engaged in the quest to find a purpose of their lives. This collection of short stories appeared between publication of *The Apprentice* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. There are three other short stories, "The Only American from Our Village", "Kanyakumari" and "Towards Finding An Expression" which were published separately in some magazines and other books but they also deserve some serious consideration due to the existential put in their plots. He has added new dimensions in this genre of short fiction by the introduction of various themes previously covered in his novels. His characters have been shown through the crisis of the self in an emotionally disturbed environment. He is acclaimed for his works where references are from the *Gita* and Western existentialism. A gap between two worlds and cultures has been duly bridged by him. In order to analyze his short stories it is worthwhile to have a subjective understanding of the novels rather than that of the objective reality that shaped the protagonists. Though, he has not followed any theory while writing them yet, he firmly believes that the short story is as effective a literary form as the novel is. Arun Joshi is aware of this literary form and of its difference from the novel and has acknowledged the same at times.

He states during an interview given to a leading news paper journalist said "Each has its own place. In my case it is theme which determines whether it would be a short story or a novel. For example, I wrote a short story, "The Gherao" which was about students' gheraoing Principal of a college. Thematically, I would not like to handle a novel about the academic world which, I do not know about; so a short story" (Bannerji, 4).

Joshi has admirably succeeded in probing the nature of existential predicament in an objective manner in most of his stories. He delves into existentialism along with the ethical choices a man has to make and it won him huge critical appreciation in India though he remained largely unknown in the West. Arun Joshi has a special interest in the field of psychology and psychiatry hence most of his writings are filled up with the personal experiences right from his youth. His short fiction as well is an array of the autobiographical elements. Joshi was also well equipped with the means to make every day credible and sharply present. He from the very beginning was able to do so, as his early short stories, subsequently collected in *Survivor* clearly show. He probes the alienated individual with great sympathy and understanding. The conflicts between the alienated self and the socio-cultural forces are the postulates of Arun Joshi's short fiction as well. Some of the characters are subjected to the extreme social, cultural and psychological pressures. The protagonists seem to be engaged in the quest for finding a meaning and purpose in their lives in world which is full of challenges.

The awareness of rootlessness and the consequent anxiety form the basis of the identity crisis in most of his short fiction. As a short story writer, Joshi more strongly than not has brought to his work the detachment from the everyday, while still acknowledging its existence, which is perhaps India's particular gift to the literature of the world. His characters are perplexed and find themselves in the fast moving world with no clear ambitions in mind. The economic suffering the social pressure, the dissolutions of the old beliefs and dogmas and uncertain loyalties mercilessly degrade their lives and injure their psyche resulting in cynical attitude towards life and established social norms and ethics. The alienation primarily arises because of the social maladjustments and emotional insecurity. The alienated

self engages in the quest for finding the purpose of life in most of his fiction and short fiction. His short stories also explore the clashes arising out of the lack of Indian values in the society.

Much of the strength of the Joshi's short stories, as his novels, lies in deep insight into the human reality and the character, the authenticity of the scenes he describes and the ease of his style that captures the shades and the expressions as well as the rhythm and the subterranean currents of the meaning in the dialogues of his characters. The characters help individuals emerge from their cocoon-like existence and rebel to realize their personal freedom. In real terms, the short stories of Arun Joshi are correct picture of real human experiences. The short fiction of Arun Joshi touches on various issues that pre determine the existence of man on this planet.

C. V. Venugopal rightly observes that the collection of short stories of Arun Joshi is "artistically satisfying pieces" and Joshi in short fiction probes the alienated individual with sympathy and understanding. In the stories human life and the world is brought out through characters and situations. The characters in his fiction seem to have been engaged in a relentless search for true being. Besides, Arun Joshi in his fiction displays an awareness of what makes for human tragedy in the society. He sees that the forces of industrialization and urbanization have exerted a deleterious influence on the life of a man. It is the aspect of life which is in Arun Joshi's view has marred the human essence as could be found not only in his novels but also in his short fiction. These stories are the outcome of the frustrated dreams, wrong decisions, perversion of the young generation, irony, quest for survival, in this antagonistic society, and pseudo Western effects on affluent society of the modern India. Ghosh opines, "It's a complex set of existence where a man finds himself lonely, unrelated, and unfulfilled and desperately seeking the meaning and the purpose of life" (Ghosh, 153).

Cut off from the spiritual moorings and from the roots of his being the narrator keep looking for life as in *The Frontier Mail Is Gone* and we find him as deadlocked with a train every morning. He gropes through the maze through the coming passages and the contrived corridors of the contemporary history for light and direction. His benighted existence is lighted only by the blinding glare of a mechanized civilization and by a vision of a frustrated man sailing about in a confused society, a society without norms, without direction and without even a purpose of existence for being on this planet. They may come out from not realized aspirations and hopes and have been told sometimes with irony, wit and satire but often with sympathy and deep understanding. Arun Joshi allows a first person narrative while writing about affluent society. This explains the conviction of Joshi to write only about the world he is familiar with. This impelling credibility of his fiction thus stems from this very conviction. Joshi's novels and the stories, all of a piece, deal with the kindred theme of man's anguished quest for survival in life's impasse. The confusions and the erosion of Indian values have corroded the inner self of human beings and there are various reasons for this degradation which has been acknowledged and narrated by Arun Joshi himself on various occasions. The conflicts of the modern man and traditional values create meaninglessness and hollowness in the life of an individual. They have thematic variety and are remarkable for technical experiment and the flexibility of the language that reflects the linguistic and cultural multiplicity of his characters. The direct intellectual, emotional or moral involvement is avoided. The normative self of the author remains non-committal.

The stories present a variety of characters almost a cross section of Post-Independence Indian society ranging from a college principal to an Indian immigrant physicist; from a soldier or from an unemployed middle class to youth and eve-teasers to a sex obsessed rustic servant; and from an old man searching his lost youth to a middle age travelling salesman attached to his crippled daughter. The upper crust Indian society has been basically focused on by the author. The stories satirize the glittering flimsiness of the affluent Indian society. A few of the stories present in embryonic form some of Joshi's thematic concerns which are treated in his novels on a larger scale. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* for example is an elaboration of a local theme of the title story *The Survivor*. *The Last Labyrinth* manifests the corruption and chaos in national life and man's frustrated quest for God. The characters in his short stories stand overlooking the meaning abyss of the time, angry, displaced and sometimes even amused at their own plight. They set out on their respective voyage on the turbulent sea of life lost in the maze of

life. The intervention of the supernatural in the crisis of his life seems to suggest that only unflinching faith can lead man out of his labyrinth of his life. Their world is rocked by misery and restlessness, doubts and hopelessness longings and changing of the divided thoughts as well as the hunger of the body and the hunger of the soul which keeps the protagonist distracted though out the story. The protagonists grope through the maze, cunning passages and the contrived corridors of the contemporary history for light and direction. The style in the short stories is rough and colloquial and a curious experiment in the context of Arun Joshi. He is exploring the possibilities for a sustainable monologue.

In real terms the stories of Arun Joshi are correct pictures of real human experiences and to some extent their existential crisis in some of the selective short stories. The erosion of moral values has corroded the inner self of human being and that has been brought forwarded by Joshi in this collection. The confused man is isolated from the spiritual moorings and has to face deadlock in life. Arun Joshi was singularly pre occupied with the agonizing quest of his protagonists by creating aesthetic themes. The quest of survival and the search for the identity has been very well depicted in this collection of short stories. Joshi has dexterously handled some serious and thought provoking existential themes in an unpretentious manner such as rootlessness, detachment, quest for better alternatives, freedom, and individual choice in this ostentatious world.

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