

“From Inaction To Action In Arun Joshi’s The Foreigner: With The Thought Of The Gita”

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Abstract

Arun Joshi as an outstanding Indian English novelist always touched on human predicament that caused by inner crises of man living in present world. Joshi’s works reflect dominant influence of Indian non- material ideology. He is one of those Indian fiction writers who have effectively tried to reflect eternal metaphysics and spirits by their protagonists. Joshi in his novels focused not only on socio-political issues but he has carefully touched deep and very sensitive layers of living persons. His novels reflect his strong faith on Indian Mythology. The Foreigner is a story of state of mind of the people facing human predicaments. The novel reflects the principles of Karm yoga described by Lord Krishna to Arjuna in the battle of Mahabharat in order to resolve his bewilderment. The protagonist of the novel Sindi Oberoi cuts from his life between attachment and detachment (to do or not to do) influence of Indian spiritual ideology. In the novel The Foreigner Sindi Oberoi, a rootless hero who searches the truth about detachment from the world at last, comes to realize the actual meaning of the theory of detachment as illustrated in The Gita, “sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved.” Alienated by the soul not of geographically, Sindi Oberoi drifts aimlessly from country to country and fails to affiliate himself to any country, culture or community. In the novel Arun Joshi coordinates both the eastern view of detached action which The Gita advocates, that of western view of action taken on pragmatic encounter with life.

Key words: Rootlessness, Alienation, Karma Yoga, Detachment, Attachment, Action, Inaction.

Introduction

Arun Joshi stands almost alone among the Indian English novelists who are preoccupied with modern man's predicament. Novel *The Foreigner* may correspond to many contemporary existential novels yet a closer scrutiny it may be seen that *The Gita*'s philosophy of action has been delicately interwoven in the sensitive handling of the plot and the psychological delineation of the protagonist's approach towards life and its problems. Through *The Foreigner* Arun Joshi reveals to us his keen awareness and understanding of a deeper reality of present times. He depicts the presence of conflict and despair among people because of the pursuit of material possessions, individual identity and non-involvement. The search for meaning full existence ends when one achieves the state of happy co-existence and harmony with his fellow beings. The novel portrays the protagonist's sense of anguish at the meaninglessness of human condition. As Shyam Asnani explains about Joshi's skill that "his ability to describe experience in a human voice so that the texture of the experience comes through, and his ability to convey the philosophical moral complexities of human life without losing the life itself" (1). *The Gita* has profoundly influenced not only oriental but occidental cultures as well. It remains a predominant force, an inspiration to braver and nobler living in the present-day existential world. *The Foreigner* illustrates the traumatic influence of excessive individualization on man. The protagonist of the novel, Sindi Oberoi, is a restless character who has wrongly interpreted the philosophy of detachment as mentioned in *The Gita*. He has seen only half of the principle of detachment which advises man to be wary of moha or attachment to this world. The fear of attachment makes Sindi an uprooted young man who looks out concernedly for mooring and a meaning in his randomly drifting life. Denied of love, care, security and cultural roots, Sindi becomes a rootless, wandering alien. Sindi calls himself: "an uprooted young man living in the latter-half of the twentieth century who had become detached from everything except himself." (**Foreigner,195**) Sindi Oberoi, an orphaned young man, who loses his parents in an air crash and is brought up by an uncle in Kenya. He receives his education in East Africa, London and America. Devoid of paternal love, familial bonds and cultural roots, Sindi grows up as a rootless young man with a built-in – fissure in his temperament. The little sense of security, which he has

when his uncle is alive, is totally shattered after his death. His experiences in of living in Kenya, London and Boston further deepen his feeling of insecurity. He feels restless in Kenya and even contemplates suicide. He immigrates to London but there also he finds his life dull and meaningless.

The *Foreigner* is the first-person narrative of Sindi who reflects helplessly on his meaningless past and is apprehensive of his equally meaningless future. Arun Joshi defines about The *Foreigner* “Sindi an existential character rootless, restless and luckless in a bad and absurd world.” (2) Sindi feels uprooted and lost like a foreigner anywhere and endeavors all through his life not to get involved with anybody or anything until he at last gets to know what detachment actually means. Sindi believes in detachment from world and its affair which results in loneliness: “I had to admit to myself that I was a lonely man.” (**Foreigner-26**)

In England he had a number of affairs but he persisted “fancy free” and he cherished the false notion that he could ever remain free and uninvolved. In spite of Sindi’s most intimate and intense moments of passion with various girls in England, he does not get involved seriously with anyone as he concludes: “marriage was more often a lust for possession than anything else. People get married just as they bought new cars.” (**Foreigner-67**) Although Sindi loves June intensely and experiences a lot with her but in a bid to remain uninvolved. Sindi refrains from responding to June’s insistent pleas to marry her because he does not believe in marriage. But the reality of the situation is somewhat different: “My love for June was streaked with hatred and anger. And every passing day my love fed up upon my anger. And both grew stronger. It was as if two high voltage electrodes had taken roots in my head and each of them kept spitting venom in my brain. The strain grew so great that I almost lost all ability to think logically for any length of time. Often, I supposed I was going mad... I had become possessive, selfish and greedy- all that I had struggled against for years. But the realization was that I had almost lost my will power. I had permitted myself to become a battlefield where the child and the adult warred increasingly. The child usually came on the top.” (**Foreigner -127-28**) Sindi is in love with June but he gives himself the air to remain detached under the circumstances and goes on to explore: “I tried to speculate about these things objectively, not realizing that objectivity was just another form of vanity. I tried to imagine the worst and then persuaded myself that I could really not happen

underlying all this was an assumption that June would not leave me, not for babu any way. What would she find in babu that I didn't have?" (**Foreigner-126**) He is jealous and possessive and entertains hatred and anger towards June for leaving him for babu. But he has no courage to possess her which he covers by his loud-mouthed philosophy of detachment and inaction. June's tragedy has made him more rootless and lonelier, drifting into meaningless uncertainties about life, existence and himself. The events in his life have wrongly taught him that detachment lies in inaction and not in active participation in the events of life: "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 form it." (**Foreigner-204**) Sindi's cynical indifference towards social institutions and his philosophy of detachment are not the result of any pragmatic approach towards life, but manifestation of the search of wrong things in wrong places: "he did not have any morality. He did not believe in the institution of marriage nor did he think much of love, friendship or loyalty in the international context". (3) After his affairs with Anna and Kathy, as a tireless seeker of truth that he is, Sindi continues wandering through the maze of his existence(**Foreigner-169**) looking for a solution to the difficult problems of life.it is in search of truth he works at a small village library in Scotland and holds series of discussions with a catholic priest there, just as the samvad between lord Krishna and Arjuna, a revelation dawns upon him ,infusing him with a new vigor and making him realize that "one can love without attachment, without desire. You can love without attachment to objects of your love." (**Foreigner-170**) This revelation by catholic priest represents the philosophy of detachment in the Geeta that one can remain detached while getting involved. And this enables him to meet the strains and challenges of life. The false detachment of Sindi drives both June and Babu to death. Sindi's obsession for detachment and his fear of causing pain to himself results in the death of his beloved and his friend. Witnessing the terrible consequence of detachment, Sindi decides to leave America and go to India: "Like many of my breed, I believed erroneously that I could escape from a part of myself by hopping from one landmark to another". (**Foreigner-176**) Sindi found himself as an outsider wherever he went. According to R. S. Singh "his dilemma is socio psychological; his alienation is not so much geographical or physical, as spiritual as it is born out of the crisis of

conscience. He could not, therefore, develop any emotional attachment to any place, person or thing” (4)

He arrives in India and meet the family of Babu’s father, a business tycoon given entirely to the unscrupulous amassing of wealth. Mr. Khemka offers Sindi a job in his firm which he accepts. But a fresh crisis in his life when the workers of the firm urge on him to take over the charge of the firm consequent upon the sentence of Mr. Khemka to jail on playing fraud with income tax accounts. Khemka’s business collapse and Sindi plans to escape from the mess. Sindi’s journey towards participation and action begins when he looks at the poor workers of Khemka industries. The struggle of Muthu to provide food and shelter to his own family and the family of his own brother, reveals to Sindi the real meaning of life, the participation, the friendly, sympathetic understanding. Sindi ‘s understanding deepens as he roots himself into the world of the miserable who live in rags. Human suffering awakens him from deep slumber to the real meaning of detachment and also purges him. His quest for the meaning of life comes to an end and Sindi takes charge of the management ship of the imprisoned Mr. Khemka business and becomes fully devoted to his task at hand. He decides to carry the sinking ship ashore and to achieve his goal hurls himself headlong into the battle of survival which the workers of the factory could not have won without his help, co-operation and guidance. He has learnt the secret of genuine detachment. Sindi understands finally that detachment does not mean escape or alienation instead it means involvement, devotion and sacrifice. Sindi’s decision to save the ruined business of Mr. Khemka and to infuse new life into it is a heroic one. Sindi leaves his self-interest aside and helps out all those employees who earn their family’s daily bread by working in that factory. Now Sindi filled with the desire to serve others and this feeling reduces his loneliness, frustration and apathy and it also creates the deepest feeling of happiness, joy and gladness of heart in him. For Sindi the journey from America to India has been long, but now ultimately, he reaches his destination. he attains the goal of peace within and without emanating from a meaningful existence and a sense of participation. His old fears recall him but he decides to join the battle of survival. and it is quite in keeping with his present mood that he thinks upon the course of his life: “in many ways the past had been a waste, but it had not been without its lessons. I had started adult life as a confused adolescent, awesomely engrossed with myself searching for wisdom and the peace that

comes with it. The journey had been long and tedious and still was not over. And the future? in an ultimate sense, I knew, it would be as meaningless as the past. But, in a narrow sense, there would perhaps be useful tasks to be done; perhaps if I were lucky, even a chance to redeem the past". (**Foreigner-221**) Mr. Khemka may look upon Sindi as a strange character, as bad as dead even though living, but he is well on his way to becoming a wiser, a more humane person. It is the nature of human distress and suffering, of which Muthu, among others, is a living image, that derives him "from detachment to involvement, from indifference to participation, from neutrality to commitment and as Muthu says **and** Sindi sees, detachment consists in getting involved with the world." (**Foreigner-226**) Sindi takes upon himself the onerous responsibility of saving Mr. Khemka's disintegrating industrial empire, and he concentrates on decisive action. And though babu's sister, Sheila, has certain misgivings about Sindi, yet they make a beginning to try understand each other better. Thus, Sindi settles not only the business of Mr. Khemka but also with Sheila, the sister of babu. The novel is a bitter commentary on the much-paraded detachment, renunciation and inaction as panacea for the problems of existence. According to Arun Joshi the only solution available to control the dehumanizing impact of science and technology is to maintain an optimum balance between individualization and participation. He suggests a synthesis of tradition and modernity with a view of fashioning a culture which will be conducive to the development and progress of both the individual and the society. Sindi, thus traverses the path from being to becoming by forsaking individualization for participation. This action defines his self – affirmation and courage. Paul Tillich explains: "For the concepts of self-affirmation and courage this means that the self-affirmation of the self as an individual self always includes the affirmation of the power of being which the self participates. The self affirms itself as participant in the power of a group, of a movement, of essences, of the power of becoming as such It is not the courage to be as oneself, it is the courage to be as apart." (5)

The false notions of Sindi about detachment fades away in the real understanding of the concept as defined in The Geeta. Detachment does not mean evasion from life. Rather life is action, but one should not be involved in the business of profit and loss, victory and defeat. Novel The Foreigner underlines the importance of non-involvement with the self but a sympathetic involvement with the world as a step towards the achievement of Karam yoga or

non- attached action. Sindi's career seems to illustrate the truth of the following verses of The Bhagavat Geeta.

Chapter: -3 न कर्मणामनारम्भान्नैष्कर्म्यं पुरुषोऽश्नुते ।

न च संन्यसनादेव सिद्धिं समधिगच्छति ॥ 4॥

Not by abstention from work does a man attain freedom from action; nor by mere renunciation does he attain to his perfection.

Chapter: -3 नियतं कुरु कर्म त्वं कर्म ज्यायो ह्यकर्मणः ।

शरीरयात्रापि च ते न प्रसिद्ध्येदकर्मणः ॥

DO thou thy allotted work, for action is better than inaction, even the maintenance of any physical life cannot be affected without action

Chapter-3 यज्ञार्थात्कर्मणोऽन्यत्रलोकोऽयंकर्मबन्धनः ।

तदर्थं कर्म कौन्तेय मुक्तसङ्गः समाचर ॥ 9॥

Save work done as a sacrifice. Therefore, O son of Kunti (Arjuna) do thy work as a sacrifice becoming free from all attachments.

Sindi evolves from ignorance to wisdom in the course of the novel. Now he is a Foreigner no more; he has discovered his true calling in life that lies in self-less action for the welfare of his people. The lesson from The Geeta transforms him into a man with a mission. Sindi's journey from alienation to integration can be summarized in the following words by Amitav basu: "Dispassion for attachment to material pleasures and comforts, restrains one's desire, dispels worries and fears and guides us to the path of peace and tranquility. To be dispassionate, you need to search your heart every day and practice untying your passion for mundane matters. An individual who meticulously endeavours to get rid of expectations, hopes and fears can set the mind at rest a stage of detachment from worldly pleasures. This however, cannot be achieved

overnight. This change needs preparation of the mind and takes time. it is a practice that an individual needs to pursue for being in the world but not of it. You should have a mind open to everything but attached to nothing. This does not mean that you have to run away to your family, society, duties and responsibilities be less sensitive. One needs to recognizes the Devine in others and work to serve the Divine. Some may argue that the incentive behind every work is gain, without which an individual will not be motivated to work. then how will the detachment happen? The gain is realization of what is Eternal and the alleviation of material suffering following from this realization.” (6)

These succinct words clearly define the ancient Indian philosophy of detached action – the wisdom that leads Sindi to the right path of compassion and participation. Through this novel Arun Joshi rejects Sindi’s excessive rationalism as a way of life. The myopic approach of Sindi deforms his attitude towards life and makes Sindi cynic about every human involvement. Sindi as existential hero, who blundered into pride, greed, selfishness, withdrawal and cowardice under the mask of detachment, comes to know its real connotation.

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