The Apprentice: A Symbol of Victimization of the Innocent By A Corrupt Society

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Indictment of materialism has already been treated in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* but it is in the third novel that this indictment comes into prominence, giving the book a wider social relevance. Unlike Billy Biswas, Ratan Rathor wades through corruption to arrive at an understanding of life and its affirmations, which take almost a lifetime, during the process of which, he is totally dejected. The novel is a treatise on the current social and political scene in independent India -- a social novel born out of intense humanism. In any ideal conception of a civilization and its representative social orders, whether socio- political or theological, man is supposed to be in the harmony with nature. In human fellowship he creates a community of beings. But in modern materialistic and cultural context, which essentially derives its meaning and power from commerce and luxury, man and the society happen to be the two warring adversaries who, in the social process, dehumanize each other and find themselves in an alienated situation.

The Apprentice, like its predecessors, is concerned with the feeling of estrangement arising from a tension between social and personal conformation. It delineates the plight of contemporary "frustrated men sailing about in a confused society, a society without norms, without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose" (70). The story runs like an incredible fantasy as Ratan Rathor, the protagonist-narrator recounts the story of his life in a somewhat episodic and reflective manner. Arun Joshi unveils the predicament of a contemporary young man who, out of sheer exhaustion caused by unemployment and poverty, is forced to shed the honesty and the old-world morality of his father to become an 'apprentice' to the corrupt civilization. In his mad pursuit to become one among the modern society, he accepts and adjusts to the guilt of the callous society and allows himself totally disillusioned and alienated. Ratan starts life fully equipped with the patriotic zeal of his martyred father. He is shocked at the atrocities committed by the British

people: "Month after month young men were sucked in to the turbulence -- to be imprisoned or shot down, or disappear underground. Every now then someone I knew was imprisoned, maimed, or killed and for days afterwards I felt burdened...." (19-20).

Ratan has seen two pictures of India: the colonial India on the eve of the independence and the post independence India. The novel relates to the time when, enthused with a nationalist zeal, people looked forward to glorious future. In" Arun Joshi's The Apprentice: The Novel of Our times", Srinath comments on how Ratan also "starts life as an apprentice with all the innocence at his reserve but gradually gets oiled by the machinery of the officialdom" (113). Ratan leaves home to seek a career in the Metropolis of Delhi where he undergoes humiliating experience, while hunting for a job. This nightmarish experience of futile job-hunting in an Indian social set up contributes to a large extent to his estrangement. Ratan narrowly escapes death by starvation through the generosity of is room-mates, especially the stenographer, by whose efforts, he finds employment as a temporary clerk in a department for war purchases. After that he never looks back. He thinks of nothing, but how to get to the top. Soon he realizes that in the process of achieving his goal of supreme power he should play the game of compromise. So he modifies his deeds and beliefs to suit his purpose. The moment he is appointed a temporary clerk his highbrow attributes raises its head. "I was a different cut: educated, intelligent, cultured and it was my right that I should rise in life, to levels higher than aspired for" (31).

Torn by the two contradictory philosophies of his idealistic father and pragmatic mother, Ratan finds it's extremely difficult, from the very beginning, to live comfortably in the 'petrified' frozen civilization.' He has to pay his price and efface his true self to fit in to the corrupt society. The hopelessness of life in the materialistic society entangles Ratan in its mazes and makes him an estranged man.

The compelling force of the dehumanized civilized society shatters the idealism of young Ratan and drives him, according to Asnani," from a jobless village boy to a very powerful magnate of the urban elite" (64). In between, for twenty years, he experiences the pangs of the so called civilization with its inevitable traits -- dishonesty, bribery, debauchery, graft, boozing and womanizing. As long as Ratan remembers his father, he retains his moral stance, which gradually gets tarnished in the poisoned milieu. Ratan's achieving the material prosperity through artifice, deceit, cowardice and corruption is quite in tune with the degenerated society around him. The very duplicity, immorality and hypocrisy that he hated in the society has now enslaved him: "I had become, at the age of twenty-one, a hypocrite and a liar, in short, a sham. I had been insecure

before and full of strange fears … From morning till night I told more lies than truth. I had become a master faker" (27).

Ratan, once a sellf-less idealist feels the need for doing something for changing the prevailing social situation. The hopelessness in life leaves Ratan nauseated who then decides to bring out a change in the existing set-up and writes an article entitled " Crisis of Character"(55), in which he vehemently criticizes the corruption in society and describes the Indian people as " glorious monument in ruin"(56).

However, he himself is influenced by his materialistic mother and the ambition to climb the social ladder becomes his sole aim. Venugopal and Hegde aptly remark that: "Joshi has admirably worked out here the struggles of a sensitive soul inching its way, against formidable odds, some present within himself and much in the social situation around, towards self-realization and attainment of grace" (164).

After his initial hesitation Ratan yields completely to the corruption of modern society in his feverish pursuit of careerism. Ratan enters that strata of society where money and merriment measure the greatness of a man. This money-culture has poisoned the entire society. Ratan feels that in money's kingdom money is the only king and all others are slaves. The more the idea of a career takes a powerful shape in him, the more he feels an inner hardening . The higher he soars in his career, the lower he falls within himself. His mad pursuit of wealth makes him totally indifferent to the welfare of others. He grows into an unscrupulous, insensitive and calculating man of ambition. Money-oriented morality seems to obliterate the distinction between good and evil. Obsession with accumulation of wealth makes him callous in his attitude to others and alienates him from others. Christine Gomez is of the opinion that "such callousness springs from erecting the Machiavellian doctrine of ruthless self-seeking as a guiding principle in personal life" (38). The more money he accumulates, the more he is dissatisfied. The higher he rises in his career, the more dishonest and fraudulent he becomes. Janaki Devi finds fault with the society for making such sensitive souls in to villains; "This degradation of the individual's moral self is wrought by society, its ways and values…."(622).

Ratan tries to be different like his father and his Brigadier friend. He revolts against and repels the ruthless self-seeking in the society. But becoming one's master and still pursuing a career in a corrupt society are incompatible with each other. He is unable to reject its comforts. He condemns it, yet he partakes of it: "And how was I going to be my own master when a system was the master of me. And how was I to throw off the system and still pursue a career"(62). His

inner self and the outer society wage a war against each other and he is devoid of peace and happiness. He groans: "The wide world took me in its wake, overwhelmed me, smothered me" (62). He does not have the moral courage to swim against the current of corruption. Therefore falls a victim to it, his helplessness is terrible:

> I had a shaky start and shaky man is like a blotting paper. If it is black ink it becomes black; if red then red…. To be slave and not know it is tolerable. To know one's bondage and yet seek freedom, that is what gets you down, knocks the wind out of you. As I sat in my room and watched I felt chocked, oppressed; rebellious but tied up totally in knots (62-63).

While Billy courageously opts out of the corrupt world, Ratan conforms to the ways of the world. Lacking the moral courage and being a prisoner of his own fear, Ratan is left in a Halmletian dilemma. Verma analyses the society's role in making a sensitive man totally estranged: "The inderteminancy in Ratan Rathor's case serves as an ironic tool of revealing the fundamental nature of the incompatibility that persists between the dream of human progress and the stubborn social order that has not allowed for that progress" (79).

Refusing to face the anguish, discloses his freedom and personal responsibilities, Ratan moves away from his ideologies only to find himself a stranger in the world. Once man surrenders his freedom to the obstinate collective will, subjecting himself to demoralization and dehumanization,he automatically becomes a part of the tyrannizing social structure that engenders moral indifference to social evil and promotes career-consciousness at the cost of moral-consciousness. Ratan flees from the state of nothingness in to an irresponsible mode of existence by surrendering his freedom of choice to the extent of alienating himself from his future possibilities.

Ratan suffers from strange loneliness. He losess his identity by becoming a part of the superfluous society. He knows that, "Deep down I was convinced that I had lost significance: As an official; as a citizen; as a man" (70). He looks upon himself as an insignificant element in the giant government machinery where his small act of bribery will not change the course of things. This feelings of his own insignificance in the scheme of things results in the loss of individuality. "I was nobody. A NOBODY" (70). His self alienation paves the way for social estrangement. The sadness of the story lies in the inevitable suction of Ratan into the whirlpool of snobbish social life. Rajendra Prasad rightly observes the role of protagonist's own contribution to his social alienation: " Arun Joshi's fiction explores the self and brings to a central focus the way in which

the self tries to assess its involvement in the alienation from the family and society"(210). Ratan's sense of being a nobody creates in him a strong apathetic feeling that his small act of bribery will not affect the already disordered and degenerated society.

The social set-up of the novel is so powerful and compelling that it assumes the function of the invisible divinity influencing everybody. When Ratan Rathor, before entering the deal with Himmat Singh, shows some inhibition out of fear that " people would come to know"(72), the sheikh admonishes him by telling him that only fools like him believe that there is a law laid down by God which they must follow. He accepts a big bride to pass a consignment of useless arms to the army, not because he needed it but because he cannot think of any reason to refuse it. The all-pervasive nature of corruption is such that only people like Himmat Singh, Ratan Rathor, the secretary and the minister but also the 'pujari' of the temple, which Ratan frequents, is not free from it. Ironically, when it comes to rationalization Ratan is frantically obsessed more by his honour than by the severity and magnitude of his crime. The corruption rampant in the Indian society is brought to light when the narrator himself, who has lost the capacity to be shocked, asks his imaginary listener: "You are shocked? I suppose the young have a right to be shocked. And in a way, it was shocking. I too was shocked …. If there is saw-dust in flour and common salt in penicillin, why, my dear friend, why can't men be expected to buy proxies in the hall of the Death" (13).

This degeneration of the individual's moral self is wrought by the callousness of the society. The pressures of the urban society disillusion young Rathor and makes him feel that he is misfit in the world. He faces inner conflicts and resentment precisely because he has to put up with totally divergent social norms. He realizes painfully that life in modern society is characterized by chaos, absurdity, brutality and insensitivity. Faced with the dehumanizing materialism Ratan feels crushed under the growing weight of significance and isolation from his fellow beings. The whole business of living in such a human society confuses him day-by-day. Ratan's dilemma is typical of an average man of contemporary highly sophisticated civilization.

The terrifying realization that his corrupt deal costs the life of his Brigadier friend haunts Ratan like death. In spite of all the material comforts available to him, discontent engulfs him. He is unable to communicate with the world at large and his one-time friends appear to him as stark strangers. He feels that he is betrayed and let down. His friends appeared no friendly than a 'street full of strangers'. This inner corrosion is pathetic and, at the same time, tragic because of the pervasive nature of the epidemic which endows him with a strong sense of aloofness and

emptiness. For him, the house itself becomes a cage, where his soul groans and grumbles and struggles to unite the chains around him. He leads a frustrated and exhausted family life. The vision of the dead Brigadier haunts him wherever he goes, reminding one, of the sad plight of the ancient mariner, who is haunted by the fear of the dead albatross. As the night advances, his fear grows. He feels as if he is sinking fast and losing his mental balance. He fails to communicate his secrets to his wife, daughter and his neighbours. He cannot feel a sense of satisfaction and he finds his daughter and wife always showing some sort of discontent. Although he continues to keep appearance; he feels alone and friendless in the office and at the home. He withholds his agony to himself for fear that they will not understand him. So "The silence remained.

The panic remained. And I remained alone" (125). As a forewarning of the violent psychic change about to take place in his life, Ratan begins to experience bouts of restlessness, estrangement and discontent that leave him a totally disillusioned man in the family. Fear-stricken, he wakes up his sleeping wife and tries to speak about his confession but cannot bring himself to utter a single word. This failure of communication shows the depth of his alienation from his wife: "that night, afraid and uncertain, I stared at her shapeless figure; I thought I looked at a stranger" (115). A gloomy sense of painful and boundless isolation engulfs him and he feels that he has cut himself off from everything and everybody else. His guilt torments him so much, that he becomes anguished and feels robbed of all familial ties. He goes through terrible days and night devoid of peace and sleep, only to find himself cut away from the society, friends and foes: "no occurrence, no conversation, no visit of either friend and foe"(125). Srinath rightly observes in his 'The Fiction of Arun Joshi: The Novel of Interior Landscape': "It is the tale of a conscience-torn man with a curious mixture of idealism and docility, a vague sense of values, a helpless self-deceptive effort to flout them for the sake of career -- in short, with a deep awareness of the conflicts between life and living" (26).

Ratan is unaware of the fact that the devil within him is placing him in the illusion of career. This illusion tears his self into pieces in the long run. He adapts himself to the ways of the world. No form of corruption is too evil for him. He is so ungrateful that he leaves the inn without even informing the Mirzapur brothers who attended on him when he was down with a heat stroke while job-hunting. He blissfully forgets the way he has come through. He becomes so hardened and thick-skinned that he does not even care when his colleagues decline his invitation to tea. Even his gait reflects his cockiness: "I had walked with a jaunty swagger that would have done credit to a general. It was a swagger that I had noticed in my Brigadier-friend except that it came naturally to him and with me it was a put-on affair that wasn't even the same from moment to moment"(74).

The pressure and demands of urban society smother him by making him a stranger not only to his own self but also to the society around him, so much so he feels the "...there was something drastically wrong with me or my notion of the world…Had there been something fundamentally mistaken about the manner in which I had dealt with the world, or in what I had except of it?"(28).

The degradation of Ratan's moral self is wrought by the society. In a bourgeois structure, the dehumanization of man, both as target and a social process is not too difficult to imagine. It is a rotten civilization in which Ratan and his mother "suffer from the same disease: discontent and discontent"(22). Ratan tells his young friend about the life and describes the newly developed colonies as: "Box upon box of identical flats, yellow by day, colourless at night. Trees that die as sapling; a dispensary, short of medicines, library without books" (6-7) and the individuals are no better. This uneasiness and restlessness arise from the individual's incapacity to fight against the precipitous force of social determinism. Unless man reacts to this monstrous social cannibalism heroically and resolutely to regain his moral freedom lost in the socio-historical process of dehumanization, the disastrous consequence is the loss of hope, harmony and humanity. Arun Joshi's Billy Biswas revolted against the callous society whereas, Ratan Rathor does not know what to choose. Any choice worth its name is drastic. The "price of making such choice is terrible, not realizing that the price of not making them is even more terrible" (188). For Billy, the price of not making such a choice in one's life is corruption. It is this corruption of the civilized world that Billy shunned to lead a rich and sensible life whereas Ratan Rathor's mind is equipped with a built-in apparatus for compromises. So he wades through neck deep in corruption. Thus Arun Joshi projects Ratan as a product of the mechanical, urban India. Joshi gives a pen picture of the frustrated and humiliated Indian society in free India that has neglected its rich heritage but has not created any new order. Hari Mohan Prasad observes the role of the society in the novel:

The Apprentice is a stark exposure of the sordid social corruption, a powerful indictment of the tyranny of bureaucratic organization that depersonalizes man and stifles his human elements. It is also a cry of the human conscience in the sick Indian social macrocosm. The novel is both a social document and a threnody of a tormented soul….in *The Apprentice* the social reality becomes the nucleus of the novel and Ratan Rathor's story is a response to it and his consequent suffering and salvation(65).

The account given by Ratan Rathor is not a mere tale of the life of an individual but also the story of the nation's transition through a period of sorrow and suffering. Narayana Hegde is of the opinion that, it "is a tale of contemporary India"(408). The novel is concerned with corruption

and other malpractice that are prevalent in Indian society. Ratan's journey of life assumes a representative quality and is record of the hopes and aspirations, conflicts and frustrations, defeats and humiliations of an individual as well as of a nation. Dhawan states that "The destiny of the individual is thus inexplicably linked up with the destiny of the nation in which he lives" (52).

It is not only Ratan but also others who becomes the victims of the dehumanized society. The Sheikh reveals to Ratan that it is due to the callous and corrupt society that his mother became a whore, his sister a vagrant and he had to sell his soul for a handful of silver. The character of the Brigadier is presented to highlight in fictional terms, the victimization of the innocent, by a corrupt society. Ratan realizes the hollowness and futility of a materialistic life and society. Madhusudan Rao remarks that Ratan is burning in the fire of insignificance: " Devoid of faith and perceiving the unjust human condition, Ratan can see only disaster and doom lurking behind everything. Even when he acquires a socio- economic status and security, Ratan feels insignificant like a pebble in the flood" (155).

An agonized self searching follows, which ultimately, leads Ratan to overcome his deep sense of alienation from the humdrum society. His sense of alienation makes him understand that a combination of humanism and religion can be saving grace of mankind steeped in corruption. Only at the end does he realize that human beings are not autonomous islands, but are integrally related to others because, no human act is performed in isolation and without consequence. Therefore, each act should be performed with a sense of responsibility. Ratan however realizes that there is no escape from the cruel society. He suggests a cure for the gnawing sense of alienation by undergoing the severest apprenticeship in the world. Symbolically, he starts at the lowest, dusting the shoes of the congregation outside the temple every morning on his way to the office. He realizes that the only way to retrieve his soul lies through an honest act of contrition and service to mankind. The novelist pins hope on the new generation and ends the novel on a positive note. There is hope as long as young men are willing to learn and are ready to sacrifice. He exhorts the young to find their way out of the labyrinthine society through the exercise of soul-searching.

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