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Quest For Meaning Of Life In Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*

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ABSTRACT: Quest for meaning is one of the greatest problems confronting modern man. No emotional problem is more threatening today than the sense of meaninglessness. Quest for meaning has been variously delineated in modern literature. Arun Joshi deals with themes such as quest, isolation, involvement, compromise and self-satisfaction. He portrays the spiritual agony of his lonely questers. They are puzzled fellows restlessly searching for their identity. They are trying to know the purpose of their life. Arun Joshi's "The Foreigner" reveals that the central experience of his fiction is quest for meaning of life. It deals 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 his so-called rootlessness. Sindi is a born foreigner who is trying to detach himself from the world. He makes relationship with several women. The deaths of June and Babu deepens his sense of alienation. He comes to India in search of the meaning of life. Throughout his quest for self-realization, Sindi experiences pains and finally he feels his soul to be coming out renewed and purified.

Quest for meaning is one of the greatest problems confronting modern man. No emotional problem is more threatening today than the sense of meaninglessness. Quest for meaning has been variously delineated in modern literature. The strength of the modern literary imagination lies in its evocation of the individual's predicament in terms of alienation or quest for identity.

Arun Joshi's novels are based on the rootlessness of the characters that is always in search for the meaning of life. In all his novels, Joshi deals with the themes of quest and complacency, self-satisfaction and involvement, East-West encounter and compromise, love and hate. It seems that his own experience of living abroad is portrayed in his novels in the form of various characters. He attempts toward a better understanding of the world and of himself. Arun Joshi has to his credit five novels – *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, *The Apprentice*, *The Last Labyrinth* and *The City and The River*. His novels deal with social alienation and explore in the Indian context some universal questions of human existence.

Everyone continues to search for a meaningful stance in life. Eventually they "step out of themselves and question on their consciousness but their own self-indulgent attitude keeping them away from facing the truth"(F 49). Unable to identify themselves with the values of life, they reach a point where they realize that all human beings are essentially alone and death is the only ultimate reality. Recent studies have shown that individuals are symbol-making creatures.

The quest for meaning is now regarded by many as a universal human motive as fundamental as our need for food and water. Empirical research has clearly demonstrated that a strong sense of personal meaning is associated with life satisfaction. Nowadays the man is bring face to face with confusion, frustration, disintegration, disillusionment and meaninglessness which may be manifest in "the alienation from oneself, from one's fellow men and nature; the awareness that life runs out of one's hand like sand and that one will die without having one, lives in the midst of plenty and joylessness.

In *The Foreigner* man can attain materialistic comforts but his search for peace remains unachievable. This search makes man to struggle as Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner* suffers to achieve the peace. *The Foreigner* is the study of “an uprooted young man living in the latter half of the twentieth century who looks out moorings and a meaning in his randomly drifting life” (F 13).

Sindi Oberoi is a man without roots and so he feels lost, alien and alone wherever he goes. He fails to perceive any meaning or purpose in life. Born of a Kenyan-Indian father and English mother, he is orphaned at the age of four. His parents met their end in an air crash near Cairo. Their only reality for him is “a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs” (F 9). Deprived of parental love, he is broken. With the death of his uncle, Sindi loses his emotional anchor forever. The various incidents of Sindi’s life appear more comprehensible against his emotional rootlessness.

Sindi moves from Nairobi where he is born, to London where he studies, to Saho where he works as a dishwasher and barman, to Scotland where he works at a small village library and discusses religion, to Boston where he studies for six years and meets June and Babu finally to Delhi where he settles down. He fails to establish a sense of meaningful relatedness with the world. Even in Delhi, he feels an outsider: “I was considered quite a misfit. My foreign background stood against me. He is a born foreigner and “is an alien everywhere physically as well as metaphorically” (F 9).

He is a wanderer without moorings and a sense of belonging anywhere. Even when he gets his Ph.d., degree, he regrets. He thinks that no education and degrees can teach one how to live. It is because of Sindi’s search for wrong things in wrong places. This crisis brings Sindi face to face with his hypocrisy, cowardice and stupidity.

Sindi wants to love and be loved but afraid of commitment and involvement. His experiences with June are directly in contrast with his previous relationships with Anna and Kathy. “The story of Sindi’s relationship with her (June) is a story of the gradual breaking down of the barriers of detachment and non-involvement that he had built up all his life” (F 13). Her affection and faith cause a crisis of conscience in Sindi. He is caught between attachment and detachment. He loves June deeply. He tries not to get attached to her for “one should be able to love without wanting to possess... and should be able to detach oneself from the object of one’s love” (F 60). The reality of the situation is that Sindi is deeply in love with June. He tries to avoid the temptation. He desires to remain free.

He forms the delusion for himself that he is detached under the circumstances. She cannot put up with Sindi’s philosophy of detachment. She tells him, “I had wanted to belong to you, but you didn’t want it. You are so self-sufficient that there is hardly any place for me in your life except perhaps as a mistress” (F 136). June regards the purpose of her life is to be useful to someone. She turns to the young Indian student, Babu. Both are engaged. Before marriage, the relationship breaks down. Sindi makes love to her when she is depressed due to the failure of her adjustment with Babu. But he forgets that “she belonged to Babu and there were three not two persons involved” (F 172) Babu is frustrated. In a fit of depression, he commits suicide.

The false detachment of Sindi drives Babu to death. June accuses him and says, “Look, what your detachment has done” (F 174). In Babu’s death, oriental innocence is destroyed. June

also dies later. Her death is a symbol of culturallag. After Babu's suicide and June's death, Sindi decides to leave America. It becomes aturning point in his career. His decision to go to India using the flip of coinreveals that thoughtful planning has lost their charm for him. In India, Sindi encounters at Khemka's house the bronzefigure of the dancing Shiva. Shiva is both destructive fury and creative force. Sindi Oberoi comes to know the purpose of his existence. He is no more afraid of love, of freedom, of growth, of involvement. He discovers man's own nature. Sindi finds the purpose of life. He is not alienated from the society but from himself. He settles down in India for he belongs to it. From a life of alienation in America and England, he moves to a life of identification in India.

Arun Joshi is passionately concerned with man's feeling of alienation and anxiety in life. But he differs from the western existential writers in the sense that in him the existentialist dilemma, the anguish of alienation and the absurdity of situation never remain the final predicament. He is different from Raja Rao and Sudhin Ghosh who hold up renunciation as the ideal mode of Indian life. He does not accept alienation the contingent condition of human life. His heroes are questers and seekers.

Joshi's presentation of the tormented self of the contemporary man has added new dimensions to the Indo-English novel. His novels have a universal affirmative message for the humanity. His protagonists search for meaning of life through a process of active experience and find it at the end.

***F- Foreigner**

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