

## **NOSTALGIC REFLECTION IN ARUN JOSHI'S NOVELS**

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### **Abstract**

*The term 'nostalgia' describes sentimentality for a period or place with happy personal associations. The word is a learned formation of a Greek compound 'nostos' meaning homecoming, a Homeric word 'alogos' meaning "pain", "ache" and was coined by 17<sup>th</sup> century medical student to describe the anxieties. Arun Joshi's novels are built around this loneness of individual life and are concerned with the exploration of the inner world of sensibility. The crisis of his novel deals with emotional traumas of fragile introverts suffering from severe loneliness and alienation from family and society. In his novels man is invariable confronted with the self and the question of his existence. The narrative technique in Arun Joshi's novels has been influenced by various type of narrative point of view including psycho-narration or the stream of consciousness technique*

**Keywords: Nostalgia, Anxiety, loneliness, dilemma, rootlessness...**

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The term 'nostalgia' describes sentimentality for a period or place with happy personal associations. The word is a learned formation of a Greek compound 'nostos' meaning homecoming, a Homeric word 'alagos' meaning "pain", "ache" and was coined by 17<sup>th</sup> century medical student to describe the anxieties. Oxford Dictionary gives the meaning of nostalgia as feeling of sadness mixed with pleasure and affection when you think of happy times in the past. In New York Times, John Tierney puts the nostalgia as 'reliving past memories may provide comfort and contribute to mental health'. Boym Svetlana on nostalgia remarks,

One notable recent medical study has looked at the physiology affects thinking about past 'good' memories can have. They found that thinking about the past fondly, actually increased perceptions of warmer, meaning being nostalgic can make you actually feel warmer(xiii)

Peter Fritzsche observed the 'nostalgia' in his research paper *Specters of History: On Nostalgia Exile and Modernity*.

In their search for security, nostalgia failed to cultivate abstract relation among strangers in formal settings...Historians have not accounted for the improbable from that nostalgic longing takes or the remarkable discernment of difference in the categories 'past' and 'present' it assumes....Moreover they miss how nostalgia expresses a culture of victims that proposes an alternative version of history as catastrophe. As the part of modern experience, nostalgia is a deepening sense of melancholy, a feeling of disconnection with the past, a growing dread of the future and uncertainty over the capacity to act or reform. (1592)

When we look at various expatriate writers and their works, we come to acknowledge that 'nostalgia' and 'pull of home' is very important theme around which their ideas linger and circulates. Everything that relates them to their land affects them, and influences them. The traditions, customs, family values, cultural and community, relatives, memories every minute details affect them being away from their home. Memories of past, of the lost homeland configures the main theme of expatriate literature. The memories evoked are of bygone times, places and people as they were when the writer experienced them, not as they are, at this point of time when they may be very vastly changed. These memories are now coloured by nostalgic imagination. The demarcating lines are faint between expatriate and nostalgic, the two spheres blend and merge. At the core of most expatriate writing by writers of Indian origin are 'the haunting presence of India' and the anguish of personal loss it represents.

Arun Joshi's novels are built around this loneliness of individual life and are concerned with the exploration of the inner world of sensibility. The crisis of his novel deals with emotional traumas of fragile introverts suffering from severe loneliness and alienation from family and society. In his novels man is invariably confronted with the self and the question of his existence, commenting on the fiction of Arun Joshi, M. K. Naik in his *History of Indian English Literature* writes,

Joshi is a novelist seriously interested in existential dilemma and equally actually aware of both the problems of post-Independence Indian society and the implications of the East-West encounter. He is a skilled narrator and can make an entire novel a long monologue without losing his hold over the reader's attention (231)

The narrative technique in Arun Joshi's novels has been influenced by various type of narrative point of view including psycho-narration or the stream of consciousness technique. This narrative technique helps us to find out the nostalgic reflection in the novels of Arun Joshi. *The Foreigner* unfolds the story

of Sindi in a series of flash-back. The past and the present, the real and the memories, Sindi Oberoi narrates the story in an autobiographical manner. Sindi reflects that 'I am not good at remembering events, but for some reason I always remember the beginning and end an affair.' (33) Despite this declaration, Sindi gathered his memories in detail. Sindi's case history may be traced to his experience of lost childhood. He does not belong to any culture. Sindi's dilemma is soci-psychological. He feels a kind of rootlessness because of the fact that his hybrid birth does not place him anywhere, because he is born in Kenya, of an Indian father and an English mother both of them died in an air-crash near Cairo leaving him quite young. He was only four year old at that time. So he had no recollection of them and it was if they never existed for him. He shares his sad memories with Mr. Khemka about them,

for the hundredth time, I related the story of these stranger whose only reality was a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs, I said they had been killed in air crash near Cairo and that I had been brought up by an uncle in Kenya (12)

This orphaned childhood creates in him a deep sense of emotional insecurity and colours his entire attitude to life. Though he has some mission, some purpose, some desire in his life he has withdrawn himself from action. He wants to escape from pain, he tries in many ways but all fails, and he internally hurts. He memorizes these internal wounds.

There were things, I wanted, only I didn't know how to get them. I wanted the courage to live as I wanted the courage to live without desire and attachment; I wanted peace and perhaps capacity to love. I wanted all these, but above all, I wanted to conquer pain... I knew what my purpose was, could I begin to fulfill it. (138)

Sindi cultivates a sense of detachment, dispossession to overcome his painful memories of the past. He wants to prevent the tragedy of June and Babu when he feels his responsibilities and involvement in it. His advices to June break his emotional tie and prove to be a self-delusion when he says, 'Marriage would

not help, June. We are alone, both you and I that is the problem. And our aloneness must be resolved from within.'(126)

The title of the novel *The Foreigner* itself represents that the narrator of the novel is searching his identity through the past as well as present memories. As AlonConfino explains the nostalgic concept in his research paper *Collective Memories and Cultural Histories Problems of Method*,

a study of nostalgia, the melancholy feeling of dispossession that is the result of this pushing away, reveals a sharper sense of temporal identity in both public and private lives during the thirty years after the French revolution. It thereby contributes to the history of memory and knowledge about the historicizing self (1386)

Thus Arun Joshi tries to historicize self through his novels as-*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* has been narrated from the witness-narrator's point of view which differs from that of *The Foreigner* where the protagonist himself is the narrator. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* a biography from the point of view of Billy's friend RomeshSahai (Romi) an officer of the ISA cadre posted as the collector of Jhansi. He had been Billy's room-mate in the USA. He takes recourse to the flash-back technique. Romi disclaims in the beginning of the narrative that he has understand Billy.

As I grow old I realize that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood. The attempt to understand is even more futile. If in spite of this I propose to relate Billy's story (7)

In the second part of the novel Billy disappeared accidentally after the meeting with Romi, now he is a district collector in central India. It is at Romi's bungalow where Billy narrates the circumstances leading to his disappearance, the strong mystical experiences he has undergone and his life as a primitive in a flat-matter-of-fact tone. The long account of what exactly happened during the ten year of Billy's absence from the civilized society is partly given in the first

person, Billy through his memory monologues, partly gathered from Dhunia, the tribal headman and partly summarized by Romi. It was a quiet afternoon in late September, Billy said,

We camped near the river. They call it a river though, in reality it is only in the monsoons. And now that the monsoon was over, it had begun to thin down. I had four boys with me and a couple of servants. We had been delayed for two hours at Jabalpur and now we had to hurry with our tents before it grew too dark to see clearly. (82)

Billy withdraws from the meaninglessness and triviality of life in the sophisticated society, which fail to sustain him and fulfill his primitive urge for a meaningful life, for the realization of his identity and for integration with the organic and vital forces of nature that will heal his truncated self and lead him to a higher and intense plane of experience. The more Billy's order monologue draws near the climate moment, the more he becomes pensive and begins to fumble for words. Billy is going to be attached with the hills, forest tribal people and each and every objects of the Nature. He has a quest for self-realization with the missing part of his soul. His sense of corruption hunts him. He, sitting outside his tent in the forest, is attracted at the call of natural objects for the primitive world. His mind moves towards his homeland and memories.

They all seemed to be waiting and watching and staring at me. It was as though I was not BimalBiswas, graduates of Columbia, the only son of a Supreme Court Judge, husband of MeenaBiswas, and father of a handsome child... It was as though I were not all this but the first man on earth facing the earth's first night...come to our primitive world they would sooner or later overcome the works of man. Come, come, come, come. Why do you want to go back? Why do you want to go back? This is all there is on earth .This and the woman waiting for you in the little hut at the bottom of a hill. You thought New York was real. You thought New Delhi was your destination. How mistaken you have been. (120-121)

This interest of Billy in primitivism is not cultivated, he just wants to return home, homeland, where he could complete his search, search of identity. In the third novel of Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice*, Ratan is the protagonist narrator. He also tells his life tale to a silent listener a young student who has come from Punjab to Delhi to rehearse for the NCC parade on the Republic Day. Replying to probable query about the direction to reach the grounds, Ratan finds the young students to be a fit listener to his tale. *The Apprentice* like *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is rendered in chronological fashion with sporadic flash-backs. *The Apprentice* is the story of the social sickness and suffering of RatanRathor. He, educated, polished, intellectual and cultured personality wanders from office to office in search of job. He narrates. 'I had become at the age of twenty-one hypocrites and a liar, in short a sham... from morning till night I told more lies than truths. I had become a master faker.' (128) He has lost of faith and nobility, justice and hard labour. He became very much pensive and pessimistic about the corrupt world. He loses his personality and identity. He tells his listeners his experiences most nostalgically,

So you see my friend, here I am, a man without honour, a man without shame, perhaps a man of our times... How do I know life has purpose? Actually I do not, And, quite honestly mine is not the mind that can grasp such questions. But let me tell you something that a colleague of mine used to say. Life is a zero, he would say, and he would add, you can take nothing away from a zero.... I have begun to see a flaw in the argument. You see, you can make it negative, Life might be a zero, for all I know, but it seems to me that it need not be negative. And it becomes negative when you take of it your sense of shame, your honour (204-205)

As Thakur Guruprasad remarks, 'the narrator in this novel is an insistent confessionalist, confession is a factor in his redemption.' (100) The dispassion in the inner world of Rathor and his arduous quest for an order irrespective of any external force lead him to an intense self-examination and confession. At the beginning of the novel Ratan memorizes an episode in his childhood that left and unforgettable impression on his mind. It was the heroic death of his

patriotic father who had laid down his life for the emancipation of the country from British rule. He remarks, 'Pardon my sentimentality. I do get carried away. Moreover, such sentiment comes easy to the guilty.' (11) That unique moment of heroic and self-sacrifice was frozen in Ratan's memory 'as a moment of great silence.

The master piece of Joshi *The Last Labyrinth* is in the tradition of the first person singular. The narrator hero is SomBhaskar, a wealthy young industrialist who relates the events of his life in flash-back. SomBhaskar says about his problem,

If I believe in God I could pray, may be run a rosary through my fingers. But that is out. Sitting around, I get into arguments; with living and with the dead, with myself. And I have had enough of the world's arguments. (10)

His skepticism and rationalism aggravate his problems and all his life he suffers from discontent restlessness and alienation. H.A. Prasad remarks the crisis of SomBhaskar's

crisis of emotion or ethics it is a crisis of consciousness... Bhaskar's dilemma lies deep down in his own self and consciousness. It is not the outer world, the objective reality but the world within, the subjective reality which is essentially the fountain spring of despair and anxiety.(89)

To conclude Arun Joshi's characters Sindi(*The Forigner*), Billy Biswas and Romi(*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* ) Ratan(*The Apprentice* ) and SomBhaskar (*The Last Labyrinth*), have been nostalgic and to some extent they could find the way to come out of these nostalgic feelings.



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