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POST MODERNISTIC PERSPECTIVES IN ARUN JOSHI'S *THE APPRENTICE* AND
THE LAST LABYRINTH

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes to analyse Joshi as a postmodern writer through an intrinsic study of two of his novels, "*The Apprentice*" and "*The Last Labyrinth*". The article also proposes to evaluate the factors that go into shaping of the postmodern psyche, with special reference to the protagonist, and how various societal pulls and pressures affect the ways in which people think and act in the postmodern society, and how postmodern Indian cities have become a symbol of labyrinthine of everything that is sought in its dark chambers which leads to no specific destination but only to endless confusion.

Key words: postmodernism, fragmentation, postmodern psyche, postcolonialism

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Joshi novels reflect the rise of postcolonial neo-colonial problems and the lionization of diasporic writing with its radical restructuring of social relations that distinguishes the modern epoch from everything that comes before. Arun Joshi, as a postcolonial as well a postmodern writer, recognizes a reality beyond the mere phenomenal world. He captures it by giving a consistent form to the shapeless facts of human existence. The postcolonial-independence period in India has been a period of significant yield of Indo-English writings, wherein the socio-economic and political issues were interpreted. The novels of Arun Joshi has succeeded in revealing a realistic picture of the epoch, events and populace of contemporary India. With the advent of colonization, European languages and culture made its way to the non-European countries. More pliant than any other form of art, it was easy to perforate and adapt to the varied cultures and modes of expression in different European settlements. The resultant literary phenomenon was a radically unique form of a novel encapsulating indigenous experience in European languages and techniques.

Before we define and discuss the features of postmodernism, it is better methodologically to clarify the distinction between postmodernism and post modernity. Burgass in "Postmodern value", in postmodern Literacy theory: An Anthology edited by Lucy, talks about 'Post modernity' or the 'Postmodern' referring to the historical era, and 'postmodernism' as the stylistic category" (349) even though both the terms are conflated. Put another way, postmodernism is an umbrella term which embraces disciplines as varied as architecture

,music, paintings, literature, philosophy and theology, and post modernity is a much narrower term which focuses on the philosophical dimension of postmodernism. Just as modernism too is a multifaceted phenomenon whose sweep reaches beyond the realms of architecture, aesthetics, economics, politics ,philosophy and technology. The term 'Postmodernism' points out Ray in his article titled 'Postmodernism' did indeed find its first widespread circulation in architecture, but it migrated rapidly until it now seems to designate simultaneously an aesthetic style, a cultural situation, a critical practice ,an economic condition, and a political attitude" (131)

The postmodern protagonist of the novel "The Last Labyrinth" Som, aged 35 and father of two children is on a passionate and possessive pursuit. The resonant voice of "I want. I want. I want. I want." boomerangs in his ears frequently to the extent that he becomes restless, dissatisfied and discontented. His desire to satisfy the hunger of his body results in a compromise on his values, social responsibilities, familial commitments etc. Life has become devoid of meaning all of a sudden, and it can again be rejuvenated within him, only by attaining the 'unattainable'. In this quest for the unattainable, Som loses the tranquil art of resting in peace. Life now becomes more chaotic and fragmented for him and he ends up losing himself in the labyrinthine ways of life. The confusion that had crept into his owes a large extent to his familial upbringing. Som Bhaskar was brought up in a family that was divided into different beliefs. While his father was a rational thinker, his mother was staunch believer of Lord Krishna. Even as a young boy, he was in dilemma, not knowing which way to take, and thus finds himself in the labyrinth in his own house. He had to succumb, ultimately, towards the direction of his father, but found no way out to any solution in his life. Taking sides with his father, he started disregarding his mother's belief in god and sometimes even ridiculed her beliefs, saying, "Krishna sat on top of her bureau and smiled and smiled and smiled until she died" (57). Som takes after his father, by being a hardcore rationalist. He does not have any faith in Lord Krishna, whatsoever, and considers his father to be the leader of his family. Fragmentation, for Som, thus begins at home.

Commenting on this fragmentation that is a necessary condition of the postmodern situation, Edmund J.Smyth avers that, "it appeared to be adequate simply to gesture to fragmentation and postmodernism as determining features of the contemporary novel as if by this strategy one were appealing to a different kind of subjectivity" (1-2).

Moreover, Angela McRobbie, elaborating on postmodern fragmentation says that,

"Bewilderment, anxiety, panic: such expressions can be attributed to any historical moment as it is transposed into cultural and artistic expression over the last a hundred and fifty years. The category of fragmentation seems to have become either too technical to be of general use (i.e. in Lacan's work) or too vague to mean anything more than torn apart. (McRobbie 27) "

This tearing apart or the disintegration of the protagonist's psyche results in losing his identity or his inner self. As Lokesh Kumar rightly avers, "Som is lost in the maze of his existence as he is puzzled after seeing the complicated construction of Lal Haveli, and he is looking ahead for the last labyrinth of which his inner self has to come out" (Kumar 94).

Even at the beginning of the novel, the seeds for the fragmentation of the self are sown. Som Bhaskar is shown as a millionaire, who has sleep disorders,

"This illness has tuned many things topsy turvy. One thing badly turvy is my sleep routine. Three to ten in the morning and four to six in the afternoon. There is nothing that K has not tried. Sleeping pills, tranquillisers, warm baths. But three to ten it remains he says, pure unmanageable chemicals. Your body is God 's chariot, says Tuka Ram. There you are!" (Labyrinth 10)

The topsy turvey sleep routine has a divesting effect on his psychology. His inner turmoil increases by the day. Som Bhaskar keeps seeking wealth, power and women and the ordeal becomes endless but nevertheless there is no peace of mind for him. He is under a massive illusion that that he would get peace of hunting for wealth,

power and women but he is thoroughly mistaken and ends up in confusion and no peace of mind. He misunderstands love, God and almost everything in life. His efforts in attaining something concentrate in life become intangible and a mirage.

Som proceeds to ease his discontent by seeking a new 'solace' at the age of thirty- five. When he meets Anuradha in her antique costume, he finds her a one of a kind personality, and his charmed by her. His obsessive passion for her is reflective of the postmodern mind, free-floating, lacking a fixed identity and list. When Som says, "I started at her not quite understanding what was happening to me".(*Labyrinth* 14), is symptomatic of the evils of the postmodern society, which values style over substance, and destabilizes the notion of nurturing family relationships. Commenting on this maniacal obsession, Veith observes,

"Postmodernists stress style over substance. Since there are no absolutes, any kind of objective meaning is problematic, including the notion of an absolute identity. The surface is more significant than the interior. This is true not only in the arts, as we shall see, but in social life" (*Veith* 85)

Postmodern character, Som thus effectively sums up by Aleid Fokkema, commenting on this postmodern character, says that,

"A postmodern character lacks a centre of consciousness. He centre of consciousness lies outside the self. The second feature is that a postmodern character is not in control of his or her own actions, and not of her own thoughts" (*Fokkema* 63).

The Apprentice speaks of a degraded but penitent protagonist Ratan Rathor who is swayed always between the good and bad, the influence of the latter overpowering and leading him astray. In all his misconduct rattan always feels a prick of conscience, a crisis of character inflicting untold miseries to his inner being. The Apprentice has all the qualities which could be traced in postmodern novels. It speaks of corruption in this materialistic world, and having found its ground in the defence department of the country, the worst part is that it is being justified. "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 death" (*Apprentice* 13). The following eulogy on money is also noteworthy: "If i had everything and had no money I would be little better than a beggar's shoe. It was not patriotism but money... that brought respect and bought security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws... but money was law unto itself" (*Apprentice* 19). The fragmented soul crying for solace is also revealed, identified in an alarming degree in this protagonist:

"To me, alas, it (the world) appeared as a bundle of mirrors, tempting and somehow held together, but on the brink always of falling apart, or ,like a boat managed by incompetent hands, a boat that could any moment overturn and drown its riders. I had food clothing, a roof above my head.... There was nothing in the present that explained my disquiet. Indeed, it was not the present that haunted my dark dreams. What clouded my horizon was the future, my friend, the unknown ominous FUTURE". (*Apprentice* 17)

"Internal conflict, discontent and hopelessness are yet other emotions which Rathor suffers from .The novel is interspersed abundantly with those feeling expressed with awe and deep understanding." It is our humiliations, my friend, and not the conquests that dominate our memories. And there are memories whose sting neither time nor words can heal. They burrow in the body of your soul, like maggots, wriggling, mocking, green forever" (*Apprentice* 21)

Ratan speaks of hoarding of sugar since the end of war but also adds that he is not worthy enough to point his finger at anyone. "Anyway, who am I to cast a stone".(*Apprentice* 22) he adds. The crisis of character is found in the following lines where Ratan declares that the root cause of all social problems lie in the Indian character. He declares to a baffled audience that "what was at the root of our downfall was not the military, nor the politicians, nor yet the weather but the INDIAN CHARACTER" (*Apprentice* 55). These ideologies which he formulates into a document and has it cyclostyled a hundred copies is a great comic venture for Ratan himself. He says that he expressed views from The Bhagwad Gita and Harappa and Mohenjodaro civilizations, none of which he himself, is able to understand. This hypocrisy with which he succeeds in captivating quite an audience is laughed at by none other than Ratan himself .He is amused. His hypocrisy reaches its pinnacle when a man as corrupt as he states that

After independence.... we were to see a display of greed before which the plundering of a Ghaznavi paled... The Indian people...were a glorious monument in ruin, a monument of which even the foundations had caught canker. The pillars were gone . So were the sculptures and the sanctum sanctorum... this...was the "Crisis of Character" that our motherland was facing. (*Apprentice* 56-57)

Joshi's brilliant style in its lucidity vivacity and epigrammatic vitality give a wonderful charm to his theme, which is otherwise a dull search for old hope in the ultimate discovery of one universal truth. His novels are fantastic essays on life that is depicted in all its facets, embodied in a versatile literary form emitting his flashing wit, his penetrating paradoxes, and his gay audacity. To read Joshi is always stimulating, illuminating and entertaining besides being informative and illustrating on his socio cultural upbringing. His polished jewelled style of narration is something unparalleled among all the Indo-English authors of postmodern period. He employs no empty verbal gymnastics but crystallizing invariably into memorable phrases depicting some subtle truth and realistic expression.

As usual the realistic mode of writings in postmodern works that speak of current practical , political, ethical or existential problems that the author experiences in his social vicinities and cultural contexts has to be moderate in the exploitation of imaginative skill to give a realistic look. But Joshi transcends such risk that is unavoidable in realist expositions and escapes being stamped as a rapid falcon descending down to do the errand of a bat. The magnanimous Joshi must have felt the elevation that we feel when "something within us, some vital essence, manages to break out and lose itself in objects that are bigger and beyond us "(*Apprentice* 21)

Conclusively Joshi's "The Last Labyrinth" protagonist Som, represents the rootlessness and rejection of permanence in the postmodern condition. Veith observes "for all of its talk about the death of the self, postmodernism actually isolates the self.. postmodernism encourages selfishness without individuality, subjectivity without identity; license without freedom"(*Veith* 86). Joshi's, Som also thus into one such mould. "The Apprentice" Ratan also portrayed ,upward in rank , he becomes increasingly fraudulent and unscrupulous, a hypocrite and a liar, a 'whore' as his colleagues put it , in pursuit of his career accepting bribe even he was not actually in need of it. Postmodernism in Arun Joshi's novels is centered on socio-cultural ethos of Indian nativity where in the author has synthesized western narrative mode with the unadulterated indigenous content of Indian existentialism. This is no easy deal. One has to express a unique spirit that is Indian through a medium that is alien to it. The dilemma that has been experienced by all the postmodern thinkers is no less crippling not alone for Indian writers but also for all the writers of commonwealth countries of post colonial era.

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