AN EXISTENTIAL APPROACH TO GOD IN THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF ARUN JOSHI

RAMESH KUMAR PATEL
M.A. (English, Political Science, Philosophy), B. Ed
RESEARCH SCHOLAR
M.J.P.R. UNIVERSITY BAREILLY

ABSTRACT

There was a great impact of Existentialism on religion, culture and literature of twentieth century and the fictional world of Arun Joshi is not the exception to it. The traits of existentialism are perpetually found in the fictional world of Arun Joshi which is the subject matter of the present study. As the novels after 1950s began to shift from the public to the private sphere and began to delineate the existential quest for the self in all its varied and complex forms, Arun Joshi is in search for existential themes, renounced the larger world in favour of inner man and has engaged himself in a search for the essence (God) of human living.

Though Arun Joshi’s fictional world has attracted serious critical attention, no single critical approach can really be adequate in analyzing the multi-faceted talent of a rare genius. Many researchers have explored his fictional world on the basis of evidence provided by his works, letters and personal interviews etc. in order to approach his work from different angles. Though researches have been made to evaluate his fictional world on modernists, realists, existentialist traditions etc., no specific attempt has been made to approach to God through the analysis of his works. There has hardly been any attempt to explore the fictional world of Joshi on the basis of an existential approach to God. Whenever researchers have touched upon the issue of Joshi’s concern with the problems of God or Self, they have dealt with it very vaguely or they left the discussion incomplete. In these circumstances the study stands justified in its attempt to have a comprehensive existential approach to God in the fictional world of Arun Joshi. So the present study attempts to broaden critical perspectives that allow a fuller understanding of Joshi’s fiction.

Keywords: Existentialism, Determinism, Individualism, Theism, Atheism, Subjectivity and Arun Joshi.

INTRODUCTION
Existentialism is not a rejection of God or self but determinism. Determinism is a belief that men are not free to choose what they like or how they behave, because these things are decided by their surroundings and other things over which they have no control. On the other hand, according to existentialism man is not directed to a pre-determined, fixed end in itself, whereas man is by nature free, and still to be determined. The real definition of man is nothingness. Man is by-nature incomplete, at every moment he experiences that he is not what he has to be. Existentialism stresses man’s bodily existence. It rejects the ancient philosophical doctrine of the body as the prison house of the soul whereby escaping from the body is to be desired. For, escape from the body is an escape to nowhere, non-existence, since life after death is rejected. For Comte, it is ‘Religion of Humanity’ that could replace all imperfect dogmatic systems based on theology. God is a useless and costly hypothesis, and we could do without it. According to Sartre “If God exists, man is nothing… Human being is the supreme and sovereign reality. There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity. Goetz, the protagonist in the Sartre’s Lucifer and the Lord says that “I tried to make myself a pillar and carry the weight of celestial vault. I’ll tell you a secret; heaven is an empty hole. God is loneliness of man. There was no one but myself. I alone decided on evil and I alone invented God. It was I who cheated I who worked miracles, I who accuse myself today, I alone who can absolve myself, I, the man.” Sartre further says that “If God exists man is nothing, if man exist God is dead… We have no witness now. How real you have become since He no longer exists.” For Sartre “Nothingness is the definition of man. He is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts; nothing else than his life.”

In the view of Kierkegaard, individual is a necessary synthesis of both finite and infinite elements. When an individual does not come to a full realization of his infinite side, he is said to be in despair. He equates God with Love. When a person engages in the act of loving, he is in effects of achieving an aspect of divine. He further says that man is not defined by the crowd or a cultural stance. Every man has the power to leave the crowd and its influence over him, to become an uncommon man. This power of actualizing a man as man is defined as God. That is, God is the self-realization of man’s subjectivity. When Nietzsche says: “God is dead! He remains dead! And we have killed him”, he deals with mostly the cultural deity. It is absurd to say that the ontological God, the creator, is dead. That is, the cultural God that man has created can die but who created us is still exists in our nothingness which is the sole definition of God. In the words of Voltaire “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him”.

According to Existentialism, in brief, we can say that God is the loneliness of man. God is the innate subjectivity of man. God is the infinite freedom within us. Nothingness is the sole definition of self. So, nothingness is that breeding place in the subjectivity of man where all possibilities can take place. If God does not exist, man is free. Here the loss of God is not to be mourned. On the contrary, in a godless universe, life has no purpose beyond the goals that each man sets for himself. That is, the road to God goes through the subjectivity of man and in the words of Protagoras, we can say “Man is the measure of all things”.

**ARUN JOSHI’S QUEST FOR GOD**

Arun Joshi’s first novel, The Foreigner, is about a rootless man engaged in a search for meaning and purpose in life. In the process of excessive individualization, Joshi’s protagonist Sindi enters into his innate subjectivity. In the garb of his innate subjectivity, he feels alienated, rootless from his milieu and society. Here Sindi depicts the idea that man is the island of his subjectivity i.e. his innate subjectivity is that breading place (God) where all possibilities can take place. In the novel, Sindi highlights the Sartrean idea of God that God is the loneliness of man and nothingness is the sole definition of man. To establish the idea of nothingness in the novel, Sindi rejects the philosophy of determinism. For, Sindi rejects the belief that men are not free to choose what they like or how they behave. He is alienated from the whole worldliness of society except his innate subjectivity which is the central point of existentialism. He 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 depicts the idea that the cultural deity that man has created can die in his dialogue with Mr. Khemka:

You had a clear-cut system of morality, a cast system that laid down all you had to do. You had a God; you had roots in the soil you lived upon. Look at me. I have no roots. I have no system of morality. (Foreigner, 135)

June remarks on his innate subjectivity that lies beyond this materialistic world which is the virtue of God:

There is something strange about you, you know, something distant. But I have a feeling you’d be a foreigner anywhere. (Foreigner, 33)

Even Sheila also comes to the same conclusion that he has something that does not belong to this world. Here she indicates the nothingness within us which is the sole definition of God.

You are still a foreigner. You don’t belong here. (Foreigner, 141)

Sindi himself muses over his innate subjectivity. He has the self-realization of his true self. He says:

It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner. My foreignness lay within me and I couldn’t leave myself behind wherever I went. (Foreigner, 61)

In the second novel, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, Joshi deals with the theme of self-realization. If Sindi, in the first novel is searching for the meaning of his existence in the material world, Billy, the protagonists of the second novel, is searching for his identity in the mystical world. He looks for self-realization in the primitive world of tribes like ancient saints. Self-realization is a process to find the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ and merge one’s ‘I-ness’ into cosmic consciousness. Cosmic consciousness is that island of
subjectivity into which individual subjectivity floats and inter-subjectivity lies between somewhere. In the present novel, Joshi has explored man’s journey from physical life to one with the mysterious underworld which is the human soul. Here Billy demonstrates eternal joy and happiness that can be achieved only through self-realization and spiritual enlightenment which is the actualization of ‘to know Thyself’. Billy’s protest against the evils of the materialistic civilization and his longing for life in a primitive society shows a process to know thyself i.e. to know innate subjectivity within us. It was the Other Thing for which he continues his quest:

That Other Thing was, and is, after all, what my life is all about. (Billy, 129)

When the narrator asks whether he desires to become a primitive, Billy hesitates and then says:

I don’t want to sound too pompous, old chap. Becoming a primitive was only a first step, a means to an end, of course, I realized it only after I ran away. I realized then that I was seeking something else. I am still seeking something else. (Billy, 129)

What was he seeking? Was it God? No, that sounded too pompous. Could it be something like that? Yes, it is something like perpetual energy lies within us. Here, he rejects the cultural and communal deities which man has made and tries to know which has made man as man. No doubt, it is the innate subjectivity of man. Here he establishes that ‘Man is the measure of all things’ and nothing is outside to him.

Tuula informs Romi that Billy is an exceptional person and:

… feels something inside him… a great force… a primitive force. (Billy, 23)

Billy himself describes his condition thus:

I was so shaken up that the first thing I wanted to do was to get back home. (Billy, 121)

Here Billy wants to re-establish man into the center of the universe and tries to enter into the innate subjectivity of man. The loud calls of the primitive world ask Billy to join, explore and merge with it to identify the true meaning of life.

Come, come to our primitive world that sooner or later overcome the works of man. Come. We have waited for you. (Billy, 120)

In this way, we see that deep-seated within him a powerful human energy which does not seek the worldly pursuit of the materialistic society.

Fate to which no temples could be built… What else but Fate prevented the sculptor- king from carving the face of his God. (Billy, 146)

The third novel, The Apprentice, deals with temporal issues of the dying moral values in the contemporary Indian society with its corruption. The protagonists Ratan Rathor, finds his peace with the mythic
values of Prayashchita and Seva. By the end of the novel, Ratan is in no way an incarnation of God but he does acquire wisdom of His light. In the words of Dr. O. P. Mathur:

Like Arjuna, a disciple of Lord Krishna, Ratan Rathor also ultimately becomes a sort of apprentice…

As Sindi slowly learns that the real detachment lies in the involvement. In the same manner Ratan’s sense of alienation makes him understand that a combination of humanism and humility can be the saving grace of mankind steeped in corruption. The apprentice’s sense of futility makes him suffer inwardly and he becomes so exhausted that he finds meaning even in zero:

But let me tell you something that a colleague of mine used to say. Life is zero, … you can take nothing away from zero… of late, however, I have begun to see a flaw in the argument… you can take things out of a zero! You can make it negative… and it becomes negative when you take out of it your sense of shame, your honour. (Apprentice, 148)

Ratan does not take much time to realize that the world runs on deals. Here he highlights sthe Sartrean idea that ‘Man simply is’.

It is not the atom or the sun or God or sex that lies at the heart of the universe: It is deals, DEALS… They are simply there, like air. (Apprentice, 51)

Ratan also highlights this existential idea that ‘Man is thrown into this absurd universe to choose his path’:

There are many sorrows in the world, but there is nothing in the three worlds to match the sorrow of a wasted life. (Apprentice, 140)

The protagonist, Som Bhasker of the fourth novel, The Last labyrinth, suffers from undefined hungers resulting in continuous discontent. He makes attempts to explore the mysteries of God, Death and First Cause. Gargi advises him and tries to evade him from taking revenge on anyone. She tells him, “God does not seek revenge. Man’s… vanity (ahankar) brings him revenge enough” (Last, 213-14). Som assures her that he is not arrogant or vain; only curious to know things and wants evidence to believe things, even in God. Joshi’s novels give the clear impression that he was gently influenced by Camus, Sartre and similar other existential writers. Every protagonist of his novels resolves the contradictions of his life through faith except Bhasker. He says:

Anuradha, listen. Listen to me wherever you are. Is there a God where you are? Have you met Him? Does He have a face? Does He speak? Does He hear? Does He understand the language that we speak? Anuradha, if there is a God and if you have met Him and if He is willing to listen, then, Anuradha, my soul, tell Him, tell this God, to have mercy upon me. Tell Him I am weary of so many fears, so much doubting. Of this dark earth and these empty heavens. Plead for me Anuradha. He will listen to you. (Last, 222-23)
The present novel fails to resolve Som’s dilemma. The Bhagavad Gita preaches: “He who has no faith and no wisdom, and whose soul is in doubt, is lost”. Som too is lost in the whirlpool of doubts and questions of life and death without attaining any fulfillment; thus he continuous to remain alienated. Usually Joshi’s protagonists find their fulfillment and progress from alienation to existential affirmation. But The Last Labyrinth is an exception. Joshi himself says:

“Alienation of my novels which I have written so for ultimately leads them back to community. I realized that in my latest The Last Labyrinth for the first time it does not happen”.

Som represents existential dilemma: chaos and uncertainty. He possesses a strong passion to know and perhaps to believe, but he cannot believe. Torn by doubt he wanders between life and death, illusion and reality, body and spirit. He suffers from an un-definable hunger, a restlessness, a Hamlet-like uncertainty. All his life he has sung the song: I want, I want, I want (Last, 47). His grand-father’s dialogue with Bhaskar throws sufficient light on the first cause of the universe that nothingness lies in the centre of the First Cause. He says:

Who knows the truth? Who can tell whence and how arose the universe? The gods are later than its beginning. Who knows, therefore, whence comes this creation? Only that God who sits in highest heaven;
He only knows. Or, perhaps, He knows not. (Last, 155)

Bhaskar echoes Darwin’s theory of evolution and question it: Darwin did not say how we are supposed to evolve further (Last, 132). Aftab replies that it is a matter of vision; Anuradha illustrates it further: May be Krishna begins where Darwin left off (Last, 132). Gargi says: There is no harm in believing that God exists (Last, 213), and that we are all children trying to reach up to a crack in the door to peep into a room (Last, 214).

To his questions, what is the First Cause? And what is in the last labyrinth? Som gets the answer as death. When his father died he got the First Cause. In a tone of feeble repentance for disbelief he remembers Kierkegaard, who says: Prayer does not change God but it changes him who prays (Last, 118).

Knowing that Som is a man with a sick soul, Anuradha asks him to look at a God up the mountains where lepers are waiting for the mercy of the Lord to cure their disease. This is the first light of faith that opens his eyes. For getting salvation the first and the foremost task is not only renunciation of desires of all kinds but self-realization. Som for the first time looks within and sees that he is a leper: Deep inside my heart I knew I was a leper, that I needed a cure (Last, 126). Here, we can easily see that Som highlights Voltaire’s idea of God: “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him”.

The last novel, The City and the River, is an allegorical presentation of the conflict between skepticism and faith, allegiance to God and allegiance to man’s power. It transcends the boundaries of this world asking questions about creation and destruction of the universe. No doubt the novel is a powerful commentary on the political scenario of the past, the present and the future, but at the same time it is an existential commentary on the absurdity of human situation. Here Joshi turns his focus from private to the public.
The present novel explores the relevance of God to man and affirms that “the world belongs to God and to no one else”. “God is the highest Truth as it is known to each one of us. He is the noblest thing each one of us can imagine” (City, 70). “The belief in God restores peace to human soul” (City, 76). The only solution to life’s problems lies in complete surrender to His Will: “In the great hand of God we stand, and can only do our best. For the rest, it is His Law and His Will” (City, 157). Although the skeptics like the Grand Master have their skeptical views: “And God- what is God? Where is He? Does He even exist?” (City, 219), the final message, however, of the novel is summed up in the Great Yogeshwara’s words spoken to the Nameless: “In any case we are only instruments- both you and I- of the greater god in the highest heaven who is the Master of the universe. How perfect we are as instruments is all that matters. His is the Will, His is the Force. But I shall be with you always” (City, 262).

CONCLUSION

Thus the fictional world of Arun Joshi displays his pre-occupation with the existential approach to God. From first to his last novel, he became more and more optimist in the sense of Voltaire: “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him”. He concludes that the element of evil does exist, but it cannot last forever. Moreover, since God resides in each subjectivity, “Is not, therefore, always rooms for hope? During the overall journey, the Fictional World of Arun Joshi highlights the existential approach to God: “God is the loneliness of man”, “Nothingness is the sole definition of man where all possibilities can take place” and “The loss of God is not to be mourned”. Thus, in the words of Joshi we can say: “the road to God goes through our innate subjectivity and taking freedom of choice as a vehicle man can reach his destiny (God)”.

Works Cited: