



The Apprentice : A Sense Of Despair and Dejection

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Abstract

In *The Apprentice* (1974) Arun Joshi presents the protagonist, Ratan Rathor, alienated from his pure self and as a victim of this money-minded corrupt society. It is a self-analysis by Ratan of his own crisis of identity and consciousness. Finally he tries his atonement through humility and penance by wiping the shoes of the temple-visitors daily. Arun Joshi has influenced not only by Western Philosophers and Indian Philosophy, but also by Gandhian Image and Principles. Ratan is a tormented and confused hero who makes his confession not before the S.P and Army man but to a young student who, in his opinion, is the most suitable receiver of his confession because he is innocent and untouched by the corrupt ways of life. The idea of anxiety arising out of the chaos prevalent in modern life is analysed in this paper.

Key words: Desolation, despair, Ratan Rathor, Arun Joshi, anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

Arun Joshi's third novel 'The Apprentice' (1974) delves deep into the inner consciousness of the individual with a view to explore the human mind. The hero, Ratan Rathor discloses the human secret of his existence because his conscience exhorts him to expiate his sins of cowardice and dishonesty by exposing his own character in a mocking manner. He is a thoroughly existentialist character, feeling incapable and alienated from his own self as well as his surroundings. He is wither Sindi or Billy. He is a practical; man. He is directly affected by the corruption in society.

The main thrust of the novel is post-independence disillusionment. The other vital theme is about the inevitability of evil boomeranging on the evil doer. Despite the chaotic circumstances the choice always lies with the individual and deliberately chooses evil, it boomerangs. The novel is influenced by the **Karmic** principle of the **Gita** and the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Ratan seem to be prey of the modern world.

The Apprentice dedicated to the novelist's mother runs into twelve chapters. In this novel, we have the story of Ratan Rathor who hails from one of the revolutionary families of Rajasthan, but are now settled in the foothills of the Himalaya. Ratan, a well-

educated village boy, goes to Delhi to make his career, becomes a temporary clerk in the Army store department where he confirmed in due course and rises to a special assistant and finally becomes an officer of the Government of India. How this honest and hardworking boy becomes a conceited man in the midst of the urban people – this is what the story is about. But he feels the pangs within, and his ever alert conscience keeps on pricking him and he turns ‘to be of use’ to others. He fulfils this desire by becoming a shoe-shine on the staircase of Delhi temple. In this novel, Joshi delineates the agonizing predicament of his protagonist, Ratan Rathor, who feels confused and lost in a world full of chaos, corruption, hypocrisy and absurdity. In this context, Tapan Kumar Ghosh observes:

Crisis in the soul of an individual, who is entangled in the maze of contemporary life with its confusing of values and moral anarchy, and his untiring quest for a remedy lie at the core of Arun Joshi’s exploration of human reality in **The Apprentice**... it depicts the anguished attempt of a guilt-stricken individual to retrieve his innocence and honour. It is a story of crime and punishment of dislocation and search (90)

In **The Apprentice**, the protagonist uses the confessional mode to express existentialist dilemma amid the social reality. The narrative consists of a long confessional monologue addressed to a young college student from the Punjab by Ratan Rathor, a Government official who also hails from the Punjab. He relates to the student the story of his fall over a period of three months during the time he was rehearsing for the NCC Parade on the Republic Day. Ratan Rathor exposes the disloyalty, pettiness, chicken-heartedness and the degeneration of his own character. Ratan has typical existentialist characters. The Indo-China War of 1962 has also been the subject of this novel. **The Apprentice** is set in an India familiar to the urban middle-class. The individual’s alienation from his fellow man and from himself and his search for identity constitute the thematic centre of Arun Joshi’s **The Apprentice**.

The gruesome details of his self-revelation are as much important as the method in which this is done. By his skilfully manipulated confession, interweaving what concerns him and what concerns others, Ratan builds up a portrait that becomes a mirror to his **The Fall** and Coleridge’s **The Ancient Mariner**. **The Apprentice** lends a personal ambience to the plot of the novel.

A very important aspect of the novel is Ratan Rathor fails to confess his guilt or crime before anybody except the young student for the latter reminds him of his father: “You look like a little like him (Ratan’s father), if I may take the liberty of mentioning. Fifty years younger, of course but grave and clear-eyed. Not awash-out like me” (TA8). His father’s selfless sacrifice had made such an ineradicable impression on his psyche that the memory kept haunting Ratan all his life. It is to the image of his father that he is making this honest confession of his fall and degeneration.

Ratan, a child of double inheritance, was brought up in an atmosphere of antithetical philosophies of life. On the one hand is the patriotic and ideal world of his father and on the other is the worldly wisdom of his mother. His father was a successful lawyer, who follows the Gandhian values like simplicity, honesty, selfless service and non-violence. He abandoned his property to join the freedom movement and is ultimately shot

dead while leading a procession. His mother has been suffering of tubercular. Ratan has nursed his father's ideals. After his father's death, his mother's money-oriented mind converted him. His mother brings him face to face with the horrible reality of materialistic society: "Don't fool yourself, son, she said. Man without money was a man without worth. Many things were great in life, but the greatest of them all was money" (TA19). For his mother, to follow his father's ideals was nothing but madness". It was not patriotism but money, she said, that brought respect and bought security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws, she said, but money was law unto itself" (TA19). Ratan was stunned at his mother's advice because he pursues his father's lofty ideals. The importance of money has changed his guiding principle of life.

After his college studies, he fed up to search for a job. He meets struggle to get a good job. There is no response of being the son of freedom fighter is of no practical value. No one considered his father's sacrifice for the cause of national freedom. He undergoes several degrading experiences while looking for a job. His intelligence and education do not come to rescue him. At this point Ratan finds himself in a shocked position:

And what is more shattering than the breakdown of a faith? Nothing that I know of. It is not the facts themselves that hurt, what hurts is the collapse of the faith that they destroy. You believe there is justice in the world. You go about the world for fifty years, this belief sitting in your heart. Then something happens and you go seeking justice. And justice is not there. Or, you assume your wife is faithful, your children love you, your boss fair, or that God exists. And then, someday proof comes along that nothing is so. This is what hurts (TA 23).

As long as Ratan remembered his father he retained his moral core, which gradually goes tainted in the competitive urban environment. He realizes that martyrs like his father and the Gandhian values have been replaced by the corruption, treachery, cowardice and hypocrisy. He moves out his village and goes in search of a job in the metropolis of Delhi. He hoped to seek support from his father's acquaintances in the city. But he got nothing except disappointment. All his dreams were shattered. A month was gone. So he had nearly half of money. He lived in a Sarai near the Masjid with five other workers. His roommates were a turner, a stenographer and two Mirzapur brothers. All of them were lower than Ratan from their studies. But they have a job. The depressing experiences of hob-haunting, of being "examined, interviewed, interrogated and rejected" (TA29) have a crushing effect on him. Ratan had lied about having a job. He became a master faker. And all this had happened within a period of six weeks. He remains always apprehensive of his failure.

What got me down, wiped the laughter off my face, so to speak, was that they worked, eared, spent, and I had no job. I, who was the most educated of them all, would soon be on the streets, a failure, an incompetent, penniless fool (TA25)

He does not like his roommates and has to lie about many things, one day he was ill, his roommates only saved him from the death. In this time, they find out that he has no job. The stenographer secures him a job of a temporary clerk in the department of War Purchases. After getting job, he ignores those people who rescue from his critical

positions and leave the inn and settled in the city. In this way a remarkable change in Ratan's character is perceptible which is hardly in consistency with his background. The early faithfulness has given place to practicability and slowly and gradually he is going to become a part of the bourgeois filth which his father used to denigrate.

He has selected for a permanent employee among the fifty temporary workers. There are many reasons to choose him as docility. It is not through diligence and efficiency, but through obedience, docility, servility, sycophancy, dexterousness and shameless 'sucking up to bosses', that helps him reach higher than the others. He is braded 'a whore', 'an upstart' by his colleagues, but this does not affect him as he has turned shameless. He tells the young students: "I am a thick-skin now, a thick skin and a wash out but, believe me, my friend. I too have had thoughts such as these. But what was to be done? One had to live. And, to live one had to make a living. And, how was a living to be made except through careers" (TA39).

Although Ratan is well-settled in life, he cannot feel a sense of satisfaction because he sacrifices the principles that have guided him all the while. Although he has all the material comforts, he has become discontentment of life. He finds himself deeply lost in the corrupt atmosphere. For the sake of confirmation and promotion, Ratan is forced to marry a girl related to the Superintendent, though he is not particularly interested. He loses his identity. He does not realize that the world runs on deals. In fact his marriage is a deal for his career:

If men forget how to make deals the world would come to a stop. It would lose its propelling power. Men would not know what to do with themselves. They would lose interest. It is not the atom or the sun or God or sex that lies at the heart of the universe; it is DEALS, DEALS (TA48).

He becomes a modern man in the full sense of the term- cunning, deceptive, selfish and easy-going. The night in the train while going to call his mother becomes a painful nightmare for him. He suffers from humiliation and cannot sleep for many nights, "... nights of humiliation, nights when you are ashamed of something, ashamed of yourself, when the darkness is fuel of insults, pointing fingers and mocking laughter" (TA47).

When the Indo-China war starts, Ratan feels strongly for his motherland. The deception is reflected in his conduct during the Chinese war. He was the first to give donations. He wrote letters to the editors of various newspapers expressing his anger at the treachery of the enemy. He started lecturing to groups of people about the details of war. The height of it all was his article, **The Crisis of Character** which he tried at first to get published in the newspapers and failing that got cyclostyled and distributed among his friends. He meditates as to who should be held responsible for the debacle of war and concludes that the disasters are not by the military, nor the politicians, nor the treacheries but the "Indian Character" (TA55). So we are facing a crisis of character. Ratan has been known to live in the corruption. Ratan's shameless hypocrisy becomes all the more pronounced when we come to know that the man who professes such noble sentiments had taken a huge bribe to sanction the purchase of worthless military equipment just before the war started.

In that time, Ratan meets Himmat Singh, the Sheikh who offers him a big bribe; he tempts him into a big bargain for the supply of defective war materials to the army. The sheikh operates in a way that nothing could be proved as all the documents regarding the deal were to be destroyed. Sheikh gives more explanation to justify their work. He tells Ratan that only a fool and hypocrite like getting killed. The sheikh also impresses upon him that the rulers of the country are “phoney people who knew only how to make speeches” and that “the ruled were brainless” (TA80). He watches with utter panic that people have started hoarding supplies such as baby food and antibiotics to sell them on much profit at the time of war. He approves of the defective war material which results in the death of his own friend, the Brigadier. Then only, he realises his imperfection: “what happened to me during that time and this? That is what I as myself time and again, without getting an answer” (TA59) and “how could men who had burnt away twenty years of their lives for a cause do things that would so surely make wreck of it? How could they possibly change so suddenly?” (TA60). He blames the prevailing atmosphere for his degradation. He finds himself rapt in the corrupt system. He justifies his action:

If I had taken a bribe I belonged rather to the rule than the exception. Peons were frequently taking bribes. So were Government officials and traffic policemen and railway conductors. A bribe could get you a bed in the hospital, a place to burn your dead... Bribery was accepted by...all those who acted in the public interest. Men took the bribes to facilitate the seduction of their wives' women for seduction of other women. All this I knew and had known for twenty years. And now if I had happened to have accidentally indulged in a little slip-up, the sky was not going to fall (TA108-9)

The bribe taken by Ratan symbolizes the very depth to which he has fallen. He had refused a bribe when he was a temporary clerk and when he needed money very badly. He now takes a bribe when he is a responsible officer and when he does not need money. Moreover he takes money to do something which compromises the very security of the country. He could not have gone beyond from the idealism of his father.

To give the final touch to the deal with the Sheikh Ratan went to Bombay. Because of his constant fear to be nabbed aroused so many questions in his mind which he placed before Sheikh before accepting the deal. He said that there is no law book written by god and they must follow it. Whatever existed has written not by God but by this corrupt society. The society would not hesitate to espouse even the meanest of the crooked means to earn money. In Bombay, another change is seen in his behaviour as he is drawn to wine and women. Ratan visits prostitutes as well and realises later that “I was in fact, at the peak of dung heap that I had been climbing all my life” (TA82). Ratan Rathor is a real confessor who confesses even the basest part of his tarnished and degenerated life.

The war has ended. The Brigadier has returned from the war. On his first Ratan finds that he is normal; but when he visits him next time he has informed that the Brigadier has had a nervous breakdown so he has been admitted to the military hospital, he finds that it was impossible to see his close friend in such a condition: “it was the second time in my life that I had felt the pain of another as my own, the first being the

time when my father was shot". (TA100). Directly or indirectly Ratan is responsible for the Brigadier's critical condition. It comes into light late. He does not know anything what happened next. When he is called at the police station, he is struck by the contrast. It is the second time that he had been arrested. Earlier he had been arrested for one of his father's pickets during the freedom struggle.

He has summoned by the superintendent of police for interrogating in the matter of supplying the sub graded war-materials which caused the loss of hundreds of lives. Before the inquiry, Ratan asks many questions himself about the investigation. He deceives him by saying that he has no knowledge about the clearance of the defective war materials. His reaction is full of surprise and of great indignation. He behaves like a hypocrite. But they tell him that they had plenty of evidence that he has cleared those war materials. While sitting on a stool in the small room at the police station, Ratan thinks of the after effect when people will come to know about his vile deeds. There is a conflict in his conscience whether he should confess or deny the allegations. He recalls all the recent scandals where the culprits got scot-free. Ratan tried to seek relief from these 'annals of corruption':

I thought with satisfaction of a recent fraud executed by the scion of one of the country's first families; the arrest of an Inspector- General of Police for accepting bribe from a racketeer, recall of an ambassador who had exchanged his country's secrets for a mistress... what had they been able to do to any of them? (TA112).

The irony of the situation is that this immoral act of Ratan Rathor critically affects his only friend in the world, the Brigadier, to whom he is indebted for a large number of things. The Brigadier deserts his post at the front during the war mainly because his equipment do not work. These are the very equipment that Ratan had cleared for army purchases. As a consequence, this brave and veteran soldier faces the shameful prospect of being court-martialled. He has a nervous breakdown and falls critically ill. The Superintendent of Police tells Ratan that he can save his friend if he makes a confession of his guilt. Himmat Singh had executed the deal in such a manner that there was no proof against Ratan Rathor. The police could not prosecute him for the crime for lack of evidence. That is why the S.P. appeals to Ratan's conscience in the name of his friend. Ratan is temporarily moved. He even decides to confess, but this good decision does not last long.

He is adamant not to confess though he is aware of his wickedness and downfall. He says, "For twenty years I had lived in this city and for twenty years, it seemed too me, there had been nothing but darkness.. You might have contributed to its downfall. But what had happened has happened. What good is it now to whimper, to confess?" (TA116). He starts looking neither at the whole affair nor as a shameful deed but as a sacrifice he is called upon to make for his friend. He even becomes angry with the Brigadier for putting him in such a situation. Being bad at the core, he has become incapable of any noble gesture. What he is interested in solely is saving his own skin. Soon the Brigadier commits suicide.

The incident shakes Ratan to his roots: "Oh, how I have hated THEM at times. And hated myself" (TA71). Thus, his friend's death has left him totally frustrated and shattered. Joshi presents death as an instrument of self-realization. According to Tapan Kumar Ghosh:

The Brigadier's death served as a catalyst that shocked Ratan out of his moral inertia and initiated the process of inner transformation in him. He was jerked out of his self-complacency, pseudo-security and illusions and was confronted with the responsibility of his gruesome crime (112)

He thinks Himmat Singh, the Sheikh, who induces him to take bribe for approving the sub-standard war materials. In a fit of ferocity, he decides to kill him for his dead friend's honour. When he reaches his house he finds him already dying. The Sheikh informs that he is not responsible for his disloyalty. The master-minds behind the racket have been none other but the Minister and the Secretary. Ratan has been made a scapegoat for no other reason except that he is "a spineless flunky" (TA136).

It is the Sheikh who makes him aware of his real-self. When he recalls his past and assesses his achievements, he finds that his life had been a great waste. He reveals to Ratan that it is the obdurate and nefarious society that has made his mother a whore and his sister a vagrant, and that he has been forced to adopt devilish ways by social compulsions. By all these revelations, Ratan understands the meaninglessness of his existence and reflects on his situation: "... that I saw more of myself that in had seen before. I did not yet know what had happened to me but one thing was clear; my life had been a great waste" (TA135). Finally Sheikh advises Ratan to think of his father and himself thus, "Try to put yourself to use, Ratan Rathor... It might be too late... but give it a try. One lost nothing" (TA141).

Ratan visits to the temple to seek peace and solace. Where he sees the fact; that religion is not free from corruption. He meets the priest who is ready to grease his palm to save his son who has used substandard material in the construction of some houses and is now put into prison. This clearly presents India as a nation plunged into corruption. Ratan realizes that there is no end to human pride, or, for that matter, to human futility. The dead Brigadier's vision trails him wherever he goes. Ratan is filled with an endless torture of fear. He realizes the severity of his sin. At last his alert consciousness alienates him from the degenerated society:

Twenty years and nothing gained. An empty lifetime. What had I learned? Pushing files? Manoeuvring? At forty-five all that I knew was to manoeuvre. A trickster, that was what I had left life make of me. Did I know the meaning of honour, friendship? Did I ever know it? Would I ever know it again? (TA133).

Ratan realizes the futility and emptiness of his whole life. He has always planned to follow the right path but was invariably diverted into a reprehensible proposition, "No one seemed to be sure... Thus the charlatans won. And when they saw the charlatans winning the best became even less sure of themselves. And at times they turned charlatans" (TA61). These lines of existential wisdom sum up the problem of every individual. Ratan

awakens to the fact that there is no cure to the dishonest ways of the world; one could only reform oneself.

Earlier he has considered life in terms of an Algebra sum where the value of the missing X could never be attained and in the process of solving even X was lost. For him life is a “zero” (TA143) out of which nothing could be deducted. Ratan’s distinction between zero and negative contains in it a subtle point of life’s philosophy. Applied to Ratan’s case this holds out well. Before the idealism preached by his father, Ratan’s life might have been a Zero; but as he feels ashamed of his misdeeds and expiates it, he upholds honour, so that his life should not degenerate into a negative one.

Having viewed his rapid moral downfall in the background of his magnificent heritage, Ratan grievously realizes the ineffectiveness of his whole life, and plans to be penitent his misdeeds sincerely. He becomes an apprentice to his moral and spiritual reconstruction and begins to learn ‘to be of use’, as he would say, “Whatever you do touches someone somewhere”(TA143). Each morning before going to work, he goes to the temple but never enters it. Sitting on the steps of the temple, he wipes the shoes of the people who go inside the temple and then begs forgiveness of all those whom he harmed. He tells the young man that:

Consider me an apprentice and you will perhaps understand. Each morning, before I go to work, I come here. I sit on the steps of the temple and while they pray I wipe the shoes of the congregation. Then when they are gone... I stand at the doorstep and gold my hands smelling of leather and I say things. Be good, I tell myself. Be good. Be decent. Be of use. Then I beg forgiveness of a large host; my father, my mother, the Brigadier, the unknown dead of the war, of those whom I harmed...(TA142-143).

During the day whenever he finds himself ‘getting to be clever, lazy, and indifferent’, he puts up his hands to his face “and there is the smell of a hundred feet that must at that moment he toiling somewhere”(TA143). Moreover Ratan gets aware of the need of a positive attitude to life. He affirms, “There is hope as long as there are young men willing to learn from the follies of their elders. Willing to learn and ready to sacrifice. Willing to pay the price” (TA144). Arun Joshi’s greatness continues in his having added a social aspect to **The Apprentice** through his didactic idea of responsible existence. The realization by the young is possible only when they have truthfulness. Existential aspect subjected this truthfulness. In this context V. Gopal Reddy in an article **The Apprentice: An Existential Study** says, “He has lost his self and felt the anguish of loss. His existential decision to recover the lost self through an act of penitence reveals the need to realize and prize one’s integrity” (Ed.Dhawan 223). In this point of view R.A.Singh admits:

Ratan Rathor projects the image of an existential character. He shows that in life no man has courage to choose whole-heartedly either right or wrong. He is himself a bundle of self-evasion and vanity, self-condemnation and humility. The fact that he could not bring himself to confession confirms his self-love and cowardice which he now wishes to cover up by his humility of action” (58).

In spite of certain western influences on him Arun Joshi's vision of life exposes his deep rooted faith in Indian culture and philosophy. Altogether, **The Apprentice** is a salient study of belief in **Karma** and purification of the soul, and it commends the enduring values of humility and self –atonement in human life.

In **The Apprentice** Ratan's realization of his own self is an outcome of his obvious confession to the National cadet. In Indian philosophy confession is a necessary process of one's own self. Penance purifies the soul of the person and provides relief to the society. The way which Ratan adopts for the purification of his soul meets the vision of **Bhakti** in **The Bhagavad-Gita**: Ratan undergoes expiation and believes that purification is to be obtained not by any sacrament or creed but by making penitence. The polishing of shoes of the devotees by him cleanses the fifth enveloping his soul. His earlier atheistic attitude towards life is gone and Ratan comes to believe that only god can help him. His sitting in front of a temple signifies his devotion (Bhakti) in which the devotee can appease his God just by praying to him meekly as Joshi Suggests,

A stage comes in your evolution when you can do without rules, but you must have a tremendous self-control...there is a long journey before you can reach that stage so that only few people are inclined to do that. There will be a time again when people will turn towards the divine and want to become instrument of God, rather than living for themselves (Piciucco 93).

The Bhagavad-Gita on the other hand recommends humility as the first need for a devotee. The devotee has a sense of utter humility. In the presence of the ideal, he feels that he is nothing. God loves humbleness, the utter prostration of the self. So Ratan decides to take up this unpleasant job at the temple doorstep Ratan Rathor initiates himself in the route of salvation through devotion.

He remembers his father's words, 'Whatever you do touches someone somewhere'. So much importance his father laid on 'karma'. He now begins to lead his life on the lines of Mahatma Gandhi and the Bhagavadgita. Ratan starts anew with a firm faith in life and himself. As Ratan says, "I know it is too late in the day. But one must try and not lose heart, not yield, at any cost, to despair" (TA143). Arun Joshi's thought has a deep impact of the karmic principle of the Gita: "There is no intervening agent between you and God. What you sow you reap" (Mathai 8). **The Apprentice** closes with the protagonist's obliteration of the ego and his far-reaching action as sacrifice illustrious in the Gita and other Hindu scriptures.

Gandhi, in his autobiography writes, "A clean confession combined with a promise never to commit the sin again, when offered before one who has the right to receive it, it is a purest type of repentance is quiet impossible. In the process of giving the confessional detail of his past spiritually degenerated life he pours out without any hesitation the darkest and the filthiest part of his life. According to O.P.Mathur, "Ratan Rathor's penance is not physical but spiritual. He is willing to pay the price by suffering humiliation" (32).

Ratan is keen on finding out the 'purpose' of life and all its activities. But he takes almost a life span to free himself from the fetters of the worthless urban civilization. The broader topic of this novel is the decayed soul of whole generation of post-independence India emerging between 1947 and the Chinese war of 1962. Ratan narrates that a

frustrated man lives in a mystified society. In this society, there are no norms, direction, even perhaps, a purpose.

The narrative of Ratan Rathor is the narrative of modern man's alienation of his inexorable struggle to triumph over alienation and to achieve some form of uniqueness with egotistical world. In the case of Ratan Rathor, however, Joshi does not let him wait for revival until the social order has been reconstructed and invigorated. Ratan Rathor disciplined attempt and his moral will have shown him the way of establishing spiritual identity with himself and with materialistic society

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