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Role of Women in Arun Joshi's Novels: A Feminist Study

Ruhi Ruchira

Research Scholar, Saint Xaviers University, Kolkata

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Abstract

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas like Conrad's Lord Jim, is narrated from the witness-narrator's point of view. The narrator in this novel is Romi (Romesh Sahai), a friend of the protagonist Billy, whom he met as a student in New York. Like Marlowe in *Lord Jim*, Romi performs the task as an involved friend and a detached narrator. In The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, Arun Joshi explores the contemporary man's inner crisis of being isolated from the whole apparatus of convention and ritual society. Billy inwardly suffers from the pangs of conscience, which keep him in a perpetual state of irritation against the social set-up in which he is placed. The narrative begins with the recounting of Billy's life in America much before the time of his disappearance into the Saal Forests of the Satpura Hills. Technically, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is a remarkable novel. The narrative in this novel does not follow a straight line; instead, it is pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle. The same events are recounted by different characters to lay stronger emphasis on the central character as well as subject matter. The tone of the last novel The City and River is overtly spiritual which shums up Joshi's perception of life in conformity with the hoary wisdom of India.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, fiction, art, technique, Bilasia, Meena, June, Leela Sabnis, Anuradha.

Introduction

"I do not wish women to have power over men, but over themselves".

This is the essence of Feminism as stated by Mary Wollstonecraft. Women from the very beginning have not been in search of power or dominance over men but have been in search of equality. These equal rights which women were previously deprived of has been fought against in the 17th century by Mary Wollstonecraft. This paper intends to explore the lesser known female characters of Arun Joshi's novels namely Bilasia, Meena, June, Leela Sabnis, Anuradha and how they have been portrayed. With reference to these women characters, one can unearth the significance of feminist theory. The current paper shall analyze how an Indian male author, Joshi, a representative of the patriarchal norms is no exception to the dominating patriarchy. This features in the depiction of women characters in Joshi's novels. The novels that are discussed in this paper are *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, *The Last Labyrinth* and *The Apprentice*.

Commenting upon the Indian youth, S.C. Dube in his book *India Since Independence* has observed, "The importance of educated youth enhances by the fact that they have been exposed to education and sensitized to new ideas and values. They give them new visions and utopias. But they are not given necessary opportunities for the realization of their aspirations. This fact has implications for the politicization of the youth. This is why student youth are attracted to political religions. It should be emphasized that even educated youth do not constitute a homogeneous group, for among them, there are differences which stem from rural and urban backgrounds, family backgrounds, class and caste background and so on." (Dube201)

Moreover, the condition of women continues to be deplorable. They have even after fifty years of independence, to face all kinds of hazards in their private life. They are the victims of harassments, molestations and tortures of all sorts leading to bride burnings due to dowry. With the breakup of joint family system, the age-old security was done away with. As a result, today everyone in the family feels divided, insecure and depressed. Arun Joshi, in his works, generally portrays male characters in a dominant way but his female characters are no less important in the sense that their role in the scheme of things, their presence in the plot cannot be undermined or down played.

In all his novels, whether it is, *The Foreigner*, *The Strange case of Billy Biswas*, *The Apprentice*, *The Last Labyrinth* or *The City and The River*, the male characters have been put on an elevated platform, the protagonist of the story has been a male character underlying the impression that female characters have been given secondary importance and then don't get the due they deserve. They have been often relegated to second class citizen, as far as literary treatment of these characters is concerned.

In *The strange case of Billy Biswas*, the central character remains Billy though we come across many female characters like Tuula, Meena Chatterjee Rima Kaul and Bilasia. Both Meena and Bilasia are representatives of a kind of society, the former belonging to the modern society and the later to the primitive. Meena Chatterjee is the wife of Billy Biswas who is described as, "quite usually pretty in a western sort of way" (Joshi37), loquacious and hallow. Billy marries Meena but "cannot hold his soul". Billy does not feel happy after his marriage with Meena as he is not satisfied with her and what he expected from her could not get fulfilled. According to Billy, the marriage "was just ill-conceived, ill-fated" (Joshi133). Billy feels that there is an absence of empathy and perfect idea of human suffering that makes their marital life a disaster. Billy finds his attraction towards Rima as futile and shameful. Rima according to Billy, "corrupts him". After meeting Bilasia he feels that he has got the "strange woman of his dreams". These characters in some point or the other, in the story, shape the sensibility of Billy but gets only an ornamental treatment by the author, Arun Joshi. They play a significant role in defining the character of Billy Biswas but have a symbolic presence only in terms of physical aspect of the novel.

In *The Foreigner*, Arun Joshi tries to do justice to his women characters but they become symbol of certain themes of social messages which the author wants to convey to the readers- All the female characters, whether it's Sheila, June Blyth, Frank Sinatra or Kathy for this matter. All of them have been used to depict a particular theme prevalent in the society. 'The Foreigner' is male which is Sindi Oberoi. "Woman characters are in association and interaction with male protagonists" (Jha168). Sindi believed in hunting for women and not marriage. In his eyes, marriage is "more often a lust for possession than anything else. People get married just as they bought new cars. And then they gobbled each other up" (Joshi60). The characters taken across from different parts of the world highlight the different way we treat females in our

society. Joshi, in *The Foreigner*, presents “hybrid culture of Indian, American and Kenyan with existential approach” (Venugopal 825). By juxtaposing different cultures, the author highlights the plight of Indian women where there are lot of deprivations, subjugation and exploitation. The western culture has been painted in a rosy manner to further highlight his point of view so the women characters become carriers of the author’s point of view. Unlike male characters, Joshi’s female characters have been portrayed as “sensitive, emotional and weak”. They act as an instrument to convey the conservatism of Indian society.

In *The Last Labyrinth*, the protagonist, Som Bhaskar, uses Leela as an object to satisfy his physical urge and drops her once he finds her not as fulfilling as he would have thought. It cannot be concluded that Arun Joshi was a misogynist. He has portrayed characters like Geeta, who temporarily looks strong but fizzles out later. His portrayal of Anuradha in the avatar of Shakti is a trademark style of the author’s writing. Joshi seems to have a strange fascination for this concept. Here also, he does not put females on a higher pedestal but glorifies them only to serve the purpose of males. Som is a product of skepticism. Anuradha is the only woman character who realizes his need which is not physical but for spirituality. She says that, “It is not me you want- I know. You want something. I could see that the first time we met. But it is not me. That too, I can see. I told you so in the Dargah” (Joshi 58-59). Gargi, the saint also tries her level best to make him realize that his life can only be peaceful if he comes out from his rationality zone and move towards the strength of spirituality. She reminds him that God has sent Anuradha to his life for this reason itself and says, “go with her...Don’t quarrel. She is your Shakti” (Joshi 110).

The Apprentice is a novel with one dominating character Ratan. He is the protagonist around whom the other minor characters revolve. In this novel also, like *The Foreigner*, the author has used the technique of contrast to portray his characters. Ratan is easily seduced by materialistic pleasures. A domestic atmosphere is being shown by Joshi with regard to the women characters present in this novel whether it be his mother or sisters. His mother used to stitch clothes and the sisters are well settled and doing the same job. Women are portrayed in this novel as homely, attending their husbands needs and happy in their own personal lives performing domestic chores. Arun Joshi’s novels are pregnant with instances of the protagonists, who are generally male, interacting with female characters who become guiding lights for the male characters to sail through and tread through the predetermined destination. So, it would be incorrect to infer that Arun Joshi does injustice to the female characters. The female characters are functional to the extent it serves the function of the male characters but that also means that these female characters complement and supplement the male characters.

Other writers of his age like R K Narayan have strong female characters as his mother has been very instrumental personality in his life. For instance, if one looks at *Malgudi Days* or other short stories, he describes the household very beautifully and how women are intricately associated with the household. He described woman in a very appropriate, Indian manner and gives them a lot of respect and this somewhere down the line comes from his love and respect for his own mother. So since he has seen a very strong female figure in his life, his portrayal of women whether subjugated or who rebel against the patriarchal norms of the society, the opinions about women have been very unbiased. He has neither tried to make them fall beyond a certain limit nor rise much above their actual positions. In *The Dark Room*, the female protagonist Savitri is wronged against. Her husband, Ramani, finds happiness in someone else. But later on when Savitri realizes that she has been used and her husband

barely cares about her, she goes in search of her own identity which she does discern that she has but then she comes back because a mother and a wife are both the roles that she plays. However, much she can do away with the role of a wife, she cannot do away with the role of a mother. She comes back for her children but at the end of the novel she understands that whatever she has is because of her husband and the final realization that something is not hers as she does not have a right over it, proves that Narayan tries to highlight that the woman understands that this is what patriarchy has given her. She is revolting against the patriarchy but not to an extent where she is totally doing away with it. She realizes that if she rebels too much it shall lead to her tragic fall. Narayan's portrayal of women is different from Joshi's as he gives extreme importance to the role of a woman and even makes them the protagonists.

R K Narayan believed in a sense of community, in a world that had people in it for instance *Malgudi Days* is a microcosmic representation of India and Indian society-society with people around so there is no concept of alienation present in his novels or stories. The female protagonists in Narayan's stories or novels keep themselves in alienation for one or two days and then feel a sense of belonging towards the community and come back to family. They give high importance to family life, togetherness, social norms. Arun Joshi believes in identity crisis, alienation- isolating oneself from the community. The moment one is portrayed as being alienated from the society, one is trying to build up a character and identity of their own, but still cannot establish it. So there is struggle within the protagonist and his or her psyche. As it's about the male more than the female, because the male is not marginalized as he is the patriarchal self or dominant persona. If he does not have a persona whatsoever he shall try to establish that by other means keeping the female character as the other.

In the novels, neither is Arun Joshi entirely neglecting the women characters nor is he glorifying them in order to gain prominence. He is instead weaving his plot around the male characters to whom the women are intricately related, thus they become a part of the plot by default. The women act as complements and supplements to the male. Joshi has tried to project the Indian lifestyle of people in literary work. While he was trying to do that he automatically represented the binary relationship of the male self and woman other. Male self is the man, protagonist and woman are the other consorts. This treatment of women in Joshi's novels is an evidence of recurrent patriarchal domination over the centuries.

Conclusion

Joshi's second novel the "Strange Case of Billy Biswas" from the content of the fourth chapter named "The strange case of Billy Biswas: The quotidian and visionary". Billy, a sensitive young boy coming from the upper crust of Indian society is endowed with an instinctive allergy to sophisticated ambience. Though sent to USA for higher studies, he loves to live among primitive people, who have able to keep their naturalness intact despite the onslaught of superficiality. He eventually develops a mystical urge for "a strange unkraft", returns to India and disappearance in Maikala Hills leaving his wife and dear son. His expedition to that primitive belt ultimately sublimated in his meeting with Bilasia, a tribal girl whose manners and life style were far more attractive than the artificial of the metropolitan Delhi. So irresistible was her charm amid surrounding ethos that Billy devoted his life to the ideas he craved for. He did not allow the eroding conflict to get matter of his and close to sacrifice his life instead.

The case of Billy Biswas is a case of the rare. He has romantic isolated for the mode of life which has been described at length by various philosophers from time immemorial. Billy is completely fed up with the grossly materialistic society. He feels that it had mistakenly turned away from the traditional values, ethics. Thus he

compromises with tradition value and culture of India.

Arun Joshi's novels reveal a world where man is confronted by the self and the questions of his existence. Instead of projecting the material agents, he concentrates on the depiction of the interior of individual psyche, the outer journey leading to the inner depths of mind. In his novels he depicts the protagonist's mental conflicts, torments and estrangements and finally their resolving of problems and acquiring selfhood. With the theme of projecting the characters with their ambitions, needs, dreams, failures, disappointments, withdrawals, detachment and alienation, Arun Joshi has added a new dimension and hope to the Indo-English literature. None of the other Indian novelists captures this consciousness of the protagonists with such depth and perfection. In connection with the European fiction Joshi should be remembered with Camus, Graham Greene, Henry James and Saul Bellow and in the Indian context he can be very well be ranked with K.K. Narayan, Anita Desai and many other modern Indo-English writers. The study of this novel that two phases of history like the two phase of India writing in English together represent the social-historical process of confiscation and decolonization and the compromise of identity.

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