

**SEARCH FOR THE PURPOSE OF LIFE
IN ARUN JOSHI'S *THE APPRENTICE***

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Arun Joshi's third novel, *The Apprentice*, deals with search for the purpose of life of its protagonist. Ratan Rathod, the protagonist, is the son of freedom fighter. The embarrassing experience of job seeking, of being "examined, interviewed, interrogated and rejected" (29) before he gets a clerical job in a government office, adds a new dimension to his life. He becomes "at the age of twenty-one, a hypocrite and a liar, in short a sham" (27). Till then he is in very much the son of his father, a selfless idealist who holds his ideal above everything.

Ratan is a curious mixture of idealism and docility. He has an indistinct sense of values, a helpless self-deceptive effort to flout them for the sake of career. He turns a fake, a sham, a corrupt official and an exhausted family man. This inside gets hollow and moth-eaten. R.S.Pathak rightly remarks, "Ratan is keen on finding out the purpose of life' and all its activities. But he takes almost a life time to free himself from the shackles of the valueless urban civilization" (1984:52).

He loses his identity and personality. He feels himself as a man without honour, a man without shame" (141). His sense of futility scalds him inwardly and leaves him so exhausted that he tells his listener most pathetically:

How do I know life has purpose? Actually, I don't. And 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 zero, he would say, and, he would add, you can take nothing away from a zero. (142)

Just as Sindi, Ratan too feels that his life has a waste. "My life has been a great waste" (135).

In Ratan's quest for self-discovery, his parents play an important role. In a sense, Ratan's life is a see-saw battle between the opposite values represented and propagated by his father and mother. His father abandoned his lawyer's profession for the new ideal preached at that time by Mahatma Gandhi. This was a set of an ideal Ratan learned from his father. His mother has different set. She

did not want her son to inherit her husband's quixotic idealism. She told him bluntly: "It was not patriotism but money, she said, that brought respect and brought security. Money made friends, money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws, she said, but money was law unto itself" (19).

After the death of his father, his mother seemed to be nearer the truth to Ratan, for he badly needed money, later he becomes disintegrated and slave of money. "Devoid of faith and perceiving the unjust human condition, Ratan can see only disaster and doom lurking behind everything. Even when he acquires a socio-economic status and security, Ratan feels insignificant like a pebble in the flood" (Rao 1994:155).

Ratan had his college education on "loaned" (23) money. He had to find a job hence he reached Delhi to 'make a mark on the world' (23) which later "sounds silly" (23) as his faith in it shatters. He says: You believe there is justice in the world. You go about the world for fifty years, this belief sitting in year heart. Then something happens and you go saking justice. And justice is not there. Or, you assume your life 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 (23).

Even in the beginning of his career, he maintains the integrity of his character. As a man with a sense of shame, self-respect and responsibility, he works hard, "harder than anybody in the department" (35) because it was a matter of survival for him. Though his docility and hard work enables him to climb the ladder of bureaucracy, he always feels restless in the unjust and incongruous world. He feels sad after refusing the enormous bribe of Rupees ten thousand offered by a contractor's son: "After the contractor's son left me that evening the night had seemed darker than before, and the world a place without law, a planet turning in the darkness, going heaven knew where" (42). The dismal abyss of life inspires nausea in Ratan Rathod who thinks of bringing about a change in the existing set up and writes an article entitled "Crisis of Character" (55). But soon it is seen that he flouts old values for the sake of career and is sucked in the vortex of bureaucratic corruption.

He is promoted as an officer, is partly as a reward for his marriage to the superintendents niece. According to Ramesh K. Shrivastava: "the driving force in his [Ratan's] life has not been to go according to his self but to please superiors. Without individuality, he is like

one of the autumnal leaves blown here and there"(1982:20). The fears of loosing his job, desire for getting promotion and his pre occupation with work damage his spirit depriving him of his identity. In the word of R.S. Pathak, "He is almost invariably in a high strung mental condition, which threatens to ravage his soul and deprive him of his personality and identity". (1984:52)

Ratan, who grow violent and rebellious to think of "carrier and bourgeois filth" (39) comes a "thick -skin and a washout" (39). His inside gets hollow and moth-eaten. In his degradation, he goes to the extent of passing defective war material accepting bribe, which results in the death of his own friend the Brigadier. Corruption to various levels and of different kinds hardens him and he has now lost the capacity.

The whole business of living is so much muddled and confused that he fails to distinguish between right and wrong: "The feeling generated in me a great confusion. What had I done what had I done which I should not have done? What was right? What was wrong? What was the measure for doing things or not doing them?" (69) In such confused state of mind he feels isolated and detached.

With terrible conscience he goes to Himmat Singh, to avenge his friend's

death and soon realizes the absurdity of the whole thing and reflects:

That is terrible sensation; my friend - may my God preserve you from it -the realization that one's life has been a total waste, a great mistake, without purpose, without results. There are many sorrows in the world, but there is nothing in the three worlds to match the sorrow of a wasted life. All else, though of revenge, of pleasure, of pain, pale before it, are made pointless (135).

In this phase of Ratan's life, it is his father who wins; his mother's philosophy takes a back seat. His father's was a way of making meaning out of life. However, Ratan had to find his own meaning. He has betrayed his true self, pawned his soul, which needs to be retrieved. Ratan, however does not know the right path to his soul, his self, his authentic existence.

The sense of meaninglessness of life scolds him inwardly and leaves him exhausted. Out of sorrow and humiliation, he is not able to understand the meaning of life. He tries to expiate his sin and he undergoes the strongest apprenticeship in the world. He wipes out the shoes of the people sitting on steps outside the temple every morning: "I stand at the doorstep and I fold my hands, my hands smelling of leather and I say things. Be good, I tell myself. Be good, Be decent. Be of use."

(143). 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. The whole business of living he fails to differentiate between right and wrong.

Thus, the novel depicts the search for purpose of life of the protagonist Ratan Rathod and his plight in "society without norms, without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose" (70).

ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

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(All the page references in parentheses are to this edition only)

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